

## Scripture Reading for June 23 2019

### Gal 3:1-14, 23-29 (NIV)

<sup>3</sup> You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. <sup>2</sup> I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? <sup>3</sup> Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? <sup>4</sup> Have you experienced so much in vain—if it really was in vain? <sup>5</sup> So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard? <sup>6</sup> So also Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

<sup>7</sup> Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. <sup>8</sup> Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” <sup>9</sup> So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

<sup>10</sup> For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” <sup>11</sup> Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because “the righteous will live by faith.” <sup>12</sup> The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, it says, “The person who does these things will live by them.” <sup>13</sup> Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.” <sup>14</sup> He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

<sup>23</sup> Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. <sup>24</sup> So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup> Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. <sup>26</sup> So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, <sup>27</sup> for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.

### Sermon: What Makes You OK with God?

In this part of the world, we are more familiar than most of the antics of Charles Blondin (1824-97). As you know, in 1859 – 160 years ago next weekend - he crossed Niagara Falls on a tightrope several times, performing various stunts on the way. For example, he walked across blind-folded, then on stilts, and even pushing a wheelbarrow. On one occasion, the Frenchman sat in the middle and cooked an omelette! One of most famous tricks was when he asked for a volunteer carry over on his back. In what must have been one the supreme acts of physical trust ever placed by one human being in another, a brave - or perhaps foolish - man stepped forward and was carried over on the great man’s shoulders.

Suppose that halfway across the man had said to Blondin: “Look here, I am having doubts and I think I’d better do the rest by myself. Let me down, and I will walk from here without you.” One can only imagine the response that he would have got, not only from the professional, but from any watching family or friends. Had the man taken leave of his senses? Did he really think that he would get across by himself?<sup>1</sup>

This is exactly the reaction Paul has on hearing that some non-Jewish men in the churches of Galatia, in modern-day Turkey,<sup>2</sup> were thinking of getting circumcised. Are you out of your minds! Who has cast a spell on you? Paul’s letter to the Galatians is polemic against a group of conservative Jewish Christians who were stirring up trouble by insisting that non-Jewish Christians need to comply with the Mosaic Law. Paul calls them “agitators” and even *curses* them!<sup>3</sup> We might find all this very strange today, but Paul’s explanation as to why being this is unnecessary is important and has wide reaching implications.

The underlying question is, “*What makes you OK with God?*” and these Jewish *Christians* responded, “By keeping the Law of Moses.”<sup>4</sup> And that was more than keeping the Ten Commandments; it included circumcision for males as a sign of keeping the covenant with God, along with keeping all the dietary laws and all the other regulations in the Torah. Paul disagrees! This is radically shocking in itself since Paul was a former Pharisee – a stickler for keeping the Mosaic Law. So how does Paul answer that question?<sup>5</sup>

Paul begins by asking them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit by your own efforts - by working hard to keep the traditions of the Law, or by simply believing what you heard [from me]?”<sup>6</sup> Obviously, the answer is that new life in the Spirit came by faith alone. “That being the case, why then are you now trying to earn your salvation by adhering to outdated rituals? If you do that then *Jesus died for nothing*”<sup>7</sup> – says Paul. Like the man being carried on Blondin’s back across Niagara Falls, he began the trip in faith, so why on earth - now that he’s half-way across - would he want to rely on himself to get to the other side? Paul is bullish and repeats, “Are you so dumb? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by human effort? We all know God has given you his Spirit because of the miracles you have experienced. But do you already have God’s Spirit because you followed the “rules,” or by your believing what you heard?”<sup>8</sup> The answer is obvious.

You see, the death and resurrection of Jesus changes *everything* for Paul.<sup>9</sup> And so Paul goes back to basics: We are *not* OK with God by trying to keep the Ten Commandments.<sup>10</sup> And no, a non-Jew *doesn’t* have to formally become a Jew [through circumcision] to be part of God’s family. Why? Because God’s

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<sup>1</sup> I acknowledge N T Wright for this example in the context of Gal 3.

<sup>2</sup> See Acts 13:14-14:23; 16:6; 18:23. This letter was written around 50 AD, *before* Paul’s Letter to the Romans (and all the Gospels). Compare this letter to the contents of Acts 15 - the Jerusalem Council.

<sup>3</sup> Gal 1:6-9; 2:4-5; 4:17; 5:12; 6:12-13.

<sup>4</sup> While they are also Christians, *still* keeping the Jewish traditions and the Law was evidently seen as important too.

<sup>5</sup> Gal 3:1-4:11 needs to read as a block to grasp the whole of Paul’s argument - and see 2:15-21 for its beginning.

<sup>6</sup> See this also in the context of the Peter’s encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10:1-11:18.

<sup>7</sup> Gal 3:3; 2:21b.

<sup>8</sup> Gal 3:3,5. I omitted 3:4 for simplicity: “Have you suffered so many things for nothing?—if indeed it was for nothing.”

<sup>9</sup> Gal 1:1-4; 2:19-21; 3:1,13.

<sup>10</sup> Gal 3:10-11.

promise to Abraham was based on *faith*<sup>11</sup> and that covenant predated God giving Moses the 10 Commandments by over 400 years.<sup>12</sup> Paul then reminds these Jewish agitators that God's promise to Abraham was that "*all the nations will be blessed through you*" and *that* promise was *still* valid.<sup>13</sup> Something has gone drastically wrong in Israel's own history, say Paul, because we Jews have tried to keep God's blessing to ourselves. And now since God's Spirit [or divine presence] is evidently *already* present among non-Jewish Christians, something of historic importance has changed.

In fact, Paul says we can divide history into two eras, that of the "Law" and that of the "Spirit."<sup>14</sup> We *now* live in the post-resurrection age of the Spirit,<sup>15</sup> so circumcision, strict dietary laws, etc. are irrelevant as a means to being OK with God. If you place your confidence in such acts, you are really placing your confidence in being an *ethnic* Jew. However, being a Christian starts and continues as a matter of faith – and faith is a gracious gift of God.<sup>16</sup> Paul makes it clear that non-Jewish Christians are *already* children of Abraham in every sense that matters.<sup>17</sup> We are heirs to God's promise to Abraham by virtue of our union with Christ, one that is signified through baptism and arises by faith alone.<sup>18</sup>

What then was the point of the Mosaic Law? That's a good question – and we can imagine Paul's Jewish critics asking him that very question. Paul's response is the Law exposed selfishness, self-righteousness, idolatry<sup>19</sup> and sin of every kind, and it is still a useful diagnostic tool for that purpose. However, all this does is produce guilt, it cannot create within our hearts a love of God or our neighbour; the Law itself has no life-giving power.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the Law was *hindering* the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham! With the benefit of hindsight, Paul then says that the Law's role was that of a temporary *tutor*, a gift from God to guide and prepare the people of Israel for Christ's coming.<sup>21</sup> The Law's work as a tutor has now ended because "the age of faith" (or the age of the Spirit) has come.<sup>22</sup> We become right with God by having faith in the one God sent; Jesus Christ.<sup>23</sup> We will explore what freedom from the Law means in practice next week!<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Gal 3:6; Rom 4:3; Gen 15:6. Don't forget God's "promise" to Abraham is also a *covenant* with him (and his descendants)!

<sup>12</sup> Gal 3:17. Paul expands this argument (based on Abraham and faith) in Rom 4-5.

<sup>13</sup> Gen 12:3; Gal 3:8. Note: Paul sees this as God's foreordained plan.

<sup>14</sup> Gal 3:17,25.

<sup>15</sup> See also 1 Thess 1:5; Rom 1:16; 1 Cor 12:3.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Eph 2:8. There is more to follow, of course, but we *begin* by relying on God's grace and initiative.

<sup>17</sup> Paul sets up "Spirit" and "faith" on one hand and "flesh" and "law" on the other hand, and this either/or contrast continues throughout the letter.

<sup>18</sup> In baptism we have a symbolic participation in Christ's death and resurrection; we therefore need to realise the old life is ended and the new life has begun. However, baptism is *not* an end in itself.

<sup>19</sup> Idolatry is anything that replaces God as primary in our lives; we can 'worship' money, power, ambition, pleasure, etc.

<sup>20</sup> See Jer 24:6–7; 31:31–34; 32; 38–41. This would sound like heresy to devout Jew, after all, Ps 19:7–11 declares that "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving soul." Instead, Paul speaks of the Law as the source of a *curse* (Gal 3:10–11; Deut 12:26)!

<sup>21</sup> Gal 3:23–25. Jesus was long-promised "the seed of Abraham" (Gal 3:16). The "seed" (*sperma* in Greek) is taken to be singular (3:16,19), not plural (3:16);, though one can also understand the Messiah as the unique representative of the "true" Israel, the *new* community of those "in Christ" (through baptism, *not* circumcision), and that he fulfilled the promise to "bless all the nations."

<sup>22</sup> Gal 3:24–25; 4:2–6. See also Rom 8:1–4. The Law does *not* lead us to Jesus Christ; Jesus rescued us from the Law's curse.

<sup>23</sup> This was anticipated by Habakkuk (Hab 2:4), says Paul: Gal 3:11.

<sup>24</sup> See Gal 5.

So “What makes you OK with God?” Paul’s response is “faith in Jesus Christ.” Or, more precisely, to acknowledge the *faithfulness* of Jesus Christ.<sup>25</sup> This does *not* primarily refer to Christ’s own subjective trust in God the Father but, rather, in the fact that his trust in God was embodied in his self-giving death on the cross, which was the fulfilment of his mission to set humanity free from bondage.<sup>26</sup> We therefore look to Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection with the same grateful trust displayed earlier by Abraham. In other words, our faith is in *what God has done* and what Jesus has done, not what [good works] we have done.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, God’s promised blessing is his Spirit, the divine presence, among us<sup>28</sup> – *not* the Promised Land.<sup>29</sup> The Holy Spirit has been given to the Church; we are part of Abraham’s inheritance!

One reason Paul is so angry is that he understands God’s promise to Abraham as creating *one* family; an international community with *no* second-class citizens - in this case, non-Jews who the agitators thought should keep the Mosaic Law to join the elite Jewish Christians.<sup>30</sup> Paul could *not* let this matter go because he saw it as totally undermining what God had done through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah.<sup>31</sup> All this leads us to Paul’s bold proclamation, one that is often said at times of baptism: “For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female—for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to the promise.”<sup>32</sup>

All this is heavy theology, but its *crucial* stuff; this is important in every generation and throughout the world! The key point is this: God’s proactive grace through Christ has broken the barriers of race, social position, and gender – examples of the kinds of things that ordinarily foster inequality and injustice among individuals and communities. God is making *one* family, of all those who are to be found “in Christ.” God’s Spirit, then, works to transform social divisions in the new community called “the Church,” so fulfilling his promise to Abraham.<sup>33</sup> This is our *identity* and we need to own it and live it!

Paul would therefore be appalled at the current fragmentation of the Church, all in the name of “reform.” Ironically, Martin Luther loved Paul’s letters to the Galatians and Romans because they highlighted this gracious heart of the Christian faith. He was fighting the notion that indulgences were *necessary* to be OK with God and sought to reform the Roman Catholic Church, just as John Wesley tried to reform the Anglicans two centuries later. Alas, the outcome was *not* reform, but schism in the

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<sup>25</sup> Gal 3:22; 2:20. These verses (and similar ones) have been mistranslated in the past and many leading Paul scholars see this as leading to a serious misunderstanding of “justification by faith.”

<sup>26</sup> Gal 3:13, 23-25. That is, bondage to the Law’s curse and burden.

<sup>27</sup> Incidentally, Paul doesn’t say anything about “forgiveness of sins” in Galatians 3. His language terms of liberation from captivity (3:22–23) or the Law’s curse (3:10, 13) and through Christ’s death on the cross both Jews and Gentiles are set free from the state of bondage.

<sup>28</sup> Gal 3:14, 3:2–5; 4:6–7.

<sup>29</sup> Gen 17:8. Nor is the promise of a so-called “Christian nation.” The kingdom of God is *not* a geographical location; it’s an era.

<sup>30</sup> See also Rom 10:12.

<sup>31</sup> This letter comes before Romans where Paul is more diplomatic and balanced in his understanding of the Law; Galatians is a polemic against those agitators. (One can now understand why Marcion had a negative view of the Old Testament Law!)

<sup>32</sup> Gal 3:26-29.

<sup>33</sup> Or “Christ’s *body*”; Paul takes up this metaphor in 1 Corinthians.

church and a proliferation of denominations. Baptism is meant to unite us, but too often it divides us. Moreover, many are proud of their denominational label, proclaiming “I am a Baptist, or a Pentecostal, or a Catholic, or a Presbyterian.” In which case our loyalty is to our denomination when it *should* and *must* be first to Jesus Christ. If we are embarrassed with the label “Christian” and prefer “Presbyterian” instead, then we have a serious problem and have misunderstood the good news (“gospel”) of Jesus.<sup>34</sup>

Second, if God’s purpose throughout history has been to work towards creating one family in this new age of the Spirit [inaugurated by Jesus Christ], then are we helping or hindering that goal? The Church has experienced division over ethnicity, with racial segregation, over the role of women as ministers, over ordaining people who have experienced divorce, and the current hot topic is how do we include the LGBTQ community into the life of the Church. If God is wanting *one* family, then “let’s *not* separate what God has joined together,” in this case, not by marriage, but through baptism.<sup>35</sup> If the Spirit of God is *already* powerfully at work in gay Christians, and you only have to visit University Community Church to see that is the case, then let us not be like those Galatian agitators who were placing hurdles in front of non-Jewish Christians as a means to become “first-class” Christians. If some Christians are quite happy to *baptize* members of the LGBTQ community, but do not want to marry or ordain them, then they have misunderstood the meaning of baptism as *already* signifying they are “in Christ” and therefore a part of God’s family! Some of you here today may not be happy with me for saying this; if so, please talk to me afterwards. I simply ask you to notice that this argument for inclusion is *from Scripture itself*,<sup>36</sup> and *not* from some politically correct notion for inclusion, *or* on the basis of the church needing to be more “relevant” to a secular society. In Paul’s day, his powerful baptismal statement (on the front of your bulletin) raised the *status*<sup>37</sup> of women, slaves, and non-Jews as co-equal partners of God’s family. Remember too that Paul’s beef with those agitators was an *internal* struggle *within* the Church family, just as is the LGBTQ situation today. The way to reconciliation is to recognise what the Spirit is *already* doing and to remember the *whole* biblical narrative, not just cherry-pick certain verses.<sup>38</sup> That’s why Paul goes back to Abraham to understand the spirit of the covenant, rather than to focus on the letter of the Mosaic Law; we need to do the same as we read Scripture today.<sup>39</sup>

In conclusion, let us *continue* trust in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Let’s *not*, like our example of the man Blondin carried across Niagara Falls, be tempted to think we can finish our journey of faith by trying to be good and keep to a set of rules and rituals. If we do that, what we are really saying is: *Jesus died for nothing*. Let us pray.

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<sup>34</sup> Moreover, *any* other loyalty (political or social grouping) that takes *precedence* over Christ is really idolatrous.

<sup>35</sup> Mark 10:9; Matt 19:6. (Obviously the context is that of marriage, but the underlying point remains.)

<sup>36</sup> In other words, from exegesis, *not* eisegesis.

<sup>37</sup> While one may still have questions over *roles* (or giftedness) within the Church, these are secondary to *belonging* to it. Some of the arguments I have heard concerning the *roles* of LGBTQI within the church (e.g., ordination) are really thinly disguised arguments for not being a *member* of God’s family in the first place (i.e., baptism)! In which case, objections to ordination (and marriage) is more like a rear-guard action.

<sup>38</sup> Paul rereads Scripture in the light God’s revelation in Christ and produces fresh and startling interpretations. He quotes from Scripture extensively in Gal 3:6–29. Some of those texts may have been injected into the debate by the agitators, such as Gen 17:8; Deut 7:26. But others were probably introduced by Paul himself – Gen 12:3; 15:6; Hab 2:4.

<sup>39</sup> Consider also Jesus’ parable of the new wine and old wineskins: Mark 2:18-22; Luke 5:33-39; Matt 9:14-17.