

“O, Foolish Presbyterians”

Galatians 3:1-5

¹ *O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.* ² *Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?* ³ *Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?* ⁴ *Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain?* ⁵ *Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— (ESV)*

If you watch enough movies you can't help but compare them, especially if you watch trilogies. There will be debates if you watch the Star Wars trilogies. "Which one was the best?" "Which one was the worst?" Or, even actors. Who is better, Chuck Norris or Jack Bauer? Come on, you have to ask? Chuck Norris is the right answer, by the way. But, generally speaking there's a trilogy of movies of which there is very little argument about which one was the worst. It's the Indiana Jones trilogy, and right now you're thinking the worst one is the second one, "Temple of Doom." Remember in the Temple of Doom, Indy just so happens to jump out of a plane without a parachute with a woman he just met and Short Round (who is a little Chinese boy he sort of adopted). They end up in this Indian village where three stones have been taken and the children have been kidnapped, and of course Indy has to rescue the kids from this sort of voodoo guy in the Temple of Doom. The scene that I'm thinking about that this passage brought to my mind was the scene where his girlfriend (for this movie at least) Wilhelmina is literally lying on barbeque-like grill, skewered, and she's hanging over a lava pit. Remember that the voodoo priest at some point (we expect because we'd seen him do it before) is going to walk up to her and literally put his hand in her chest and pull out her heart and hand it to her. Where's Indiana Jones now when you need him? Unfortunately, Indy has been bewitched. Indy is under a spell, so Indy is standing right there just sort of glassy-eyed watching this all go down. Short Round keeps yelling, "Come on, Indy. Come on, Indy." Nothing. Finally, Short Round has to take things into his own hands. He breaks free from a guard and grabs a torch and says, "I'm sorry, Indy." He takes a torch and he shoves it right into Indiana Jones' gut, which has the effect of waking him up. Indy looks down at him and winks. And you know when Indy winks everything is going to be okay. He found the stones, rescued the kids, and they went on to make a third movie.

What's the point of that story? There are times when you have to be shocked to your senses, when you have to be awoken. He needed something drastic to wake him up. Now, imagine if you're sitting in church and I say, "Guys, I have something to tell you." And the first thing I say out of my mouth is, "O foolish Presbyterians! You're idiots." That's what Paul says here. He's getting their attention.

What Paul is doing is for the first two chapters of this letter are two things. Over the course of the whole letter he's going to make the case that Jesus plus anything equals nothing. In other words, the way we're saved is by trusting in Jesus by faith alone, and adding anything to that actually takes away from it. So in the first chapter, Paul's defending the fact that this is the truth, the gospel, that Jesus was crucified on our behalf. The second thing, he defends the fact that he is an apostle and has the authority to even preach this. We think that's because Judaizers came in and taught the Galatians something different. They came in teaching that, "Jesus is good but, you probably should be circumcised as well. You need to obey the works of the law as well as trust Jesus in order to be saved." So for the first two chapters, Paul dispenses with that. He says, "That's just not true." Not only does he have the authority as an apostle, but he makes a great case for why he has the authority as an apostle. The last time we looked at it last week, Paul talked about this great doctrine—justification by faith alone—that we're counted righteous before God not on the basis of our own works but on the basis of Jesus' works if we would only believe that and have faith in that. Paul answered the objections, "Why bother being good then? If works don't matter, what does it matter? If I can do anything I want and just be forgiven, why don't I just become a Christian and then go do what I want, and I'll just ask for forgiveness?" Paul says, "That can't be because we're united to Jesus when you trust Him." In other words, just like a head and a body, or a husband or a wife. You and Jesus are of each other's flesh, if you will. That happens, of course, by the Holy Spirit, and Paul is going to talk about

that today. He's going to be talking about the Holy Spirit, but he changes gears now, and he changes from defending the gospel and defending his being an apostle to actually explaining the gospel and explaining the theology behind his gospel. "O foolish Presbyterians, you need to keep your ears open." I said that on purpose. He appeals first and foremost not to the Bible, not to scripture, not to anything else. He appeals to the Galatians' experience. Presbyterians aren't always big on experiencing things. We like to think about it and study it and doctrinize it and theologize it, but Paul appeals directly to the things that they have experienced.

We're going to talk about three things this morning. Paul is going to ask about six questions. They're all rhetorical. We're going to boil those six questions down to three questions. First you have a question of initiation or beginnings; second is a question of endings; last is a question of continuation— how do you live the Christian life? Paul is going to appeal to their experience and he opens up with this sort of statement that had to get everyone's attention. He says, "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" That language in Greek is basically like if you've ever heard about someone giving you the "stink eye" or the "evil eye." They have you mesmerized, you're entranced. That's the language that Paul is using. "Who has you entranced? Who has you under their evil eye?" He's going to try and break that for them.

Sometimes you have to be told hard truths. A good friend of mine, a guy named Hal Farnsworth, one of the smartest people I know is a pastor in Athens, Georgia. He's also one of the most disarming guys you know, which makes him dangerous because he's so smart. He has a very thick southern accent. One time I heard him ask someone else, let's call the guy, Bob. "Bob, let me ask you a question." "Sure." "If you were self-deceived, do you think you'd know it?" Crickets [silence]. Think about it. If you're self-deceived, do you think you'd know it? By definition you couldn't. You need someone to come in from outside to actually show you what is true. Paul is saying, "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" Then he begins, before he starts asking those questions, by showing them what is true. What is the beginning, end, middle, everything of Paul's ministry revolves around what? He tells us right in verse 1.

¹ . . . *It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. (ESV)*

That's it. That's all you need to know Paul would say. "It was before your eyes that Jesus was publically portrayed as crucified." In Paul's mind that happens through preaching, but the language leads itself to something else. The language there was "placarded."

I heard someone on the radio (I don't know who it was), but they were interviewing the White House press secretary. He was complaining that Tea Party people had become violent. He said, "Well, do you have any examples of their violence?" He said, "Yes, they were brandishing placards." It just struck me as funny because placards aren't particularly dangerous unless they challenge everything about your life and everything about your worldview. Then a placard can be a little bit dangerous or offensive. That's what Paul is talking about. He says, "Jesus was placarded before you. I brandished a placard of Jesus before you." Imagine there's a community bulletin board. One commentator said it would even be appropriate if it was modern day language to say, "Jesus Christ was projected in front of you as crucified." Paul says, "Everything that I've ever told you revolves around this one thing, Jesus Christ and him crucified." Here's the problem with the Galatians and with a lot of Christians. They were mesmerized by something other than the cross of Jesus. As a Christian, or as someone who is not a Christian, you are always mesmerized either by the cross of Jesus or something else, either by the cross of Jesus or all the problems in your life, the cross of Jesus or what's going on at work, the cross of Jesus or your family, negative or positive. He says, "Right before your eyes I placarded Jesus before you. It's as plain as the nose on your face. How can you be mesmerized by something else?" In fact, they had. What had they been mesmerized by? They'd been mesmerized by some bogus graffiti, if you will, that had been sprayed across the sign. Basically Paul placarded Jesus and the Judaizers came in like taggers with spray paint cans and messed up what he had portrayed before them. They spray painted "Works of the Law" across the placard. That sort of ruins the picture doesn't it? That's what they had done. So Paul begins to ask them some questions. They're the

kind of questions you hate because the answer is so obvious, but you have to ask them. What's the first question? Initiation. Paul asks in verse 2, "Let me ask you one thing" then he goes on to ask them about six things.

² *Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? (ESV)*

He's asking the question of initiation. The question is for those in the Galatian church who would consider themselves Christians. As a side note, when you become a Christian what also happens at that time is you receive God's spirit? That's how the union with Christ is achieved, God's spirit comes and dwells within us. He says, "When you became a Christian (did God give you his Spirit) or did you become a Christian by works of the law or by hearing with faith?" How about it? That's a question we don't tend to ask ourselves. Many people in this room, you may have been a Christian 20, 30, 40, or 50 years. When was the last time you thought about when you became a Christian and what it was like then?

I think about that all the time. For seventeen years I went to church about two times. At the age of seventeen some girls invited me to go to a camp. The first night at camp they said, "We're going to hear a speaker." I thought, "Okay. That's odd, but I'll do it." The speaker talked about sin and he talked about the fact that God was holy and he would punish all sin. Then he said, "Good night, kids." I'd never been to church and I was broken. Why? I walked out and started crying and someone asked me, "What's wrong?" I said, "If that's true, I have no hope at all." All I can remember him saying to me was the name of Jesus. I begged Jesus to forgive me and put my faith in him that night. I found out later they do tell you about Jesus on Thursday. I guess I wasn't willing to wait. It's my ADD, I guess. When I look at my own life I say, "Tommy, did God save you because of the works of the law or did God save you because he wanted to save you?" What is it that made me want to go to the camp, and what was it that all of a sudden opened my eyes and saw that I was a sinner and that Jesus had died for me? It was God's initiation. It always is. God always initiates with sinners. Have you ever heard me say that? God always initiates with sinners. That's what Paul is saying here. He said, "How did you start this whole gig, through God's initiation or did you start it through works of the law?"

You know you started with God's initiation if he changed you. I remember as clearly as if it were yesterday, being in the Army. I had been in the Ranger battalion for a short time. Sergeant Allen was a good platoon sergeant, so he'd go from one position to another just chatting. He sat down at my position at one point and said, "Allen, you're a Christian I hear." I said, "Yes, Sergeant." He was a Native American, a Nez Pierce Indian. I said, "I don't believe in the white man's gods." When you're a private you say basically nothing. "Okay." He said, "Why do you believe it." He started hammering me with questions. I said, "Sergeant, may I speak freely?" "Yes, you may." I said, "I don't know how to explain it. I know it's true because it changed me." That's it. I guess I could explain better now, but you know there's really not a better answer than that. Has the gospel changed you? If it has changed you, why would you think something else could change you? Why would you tell someone else that works of the law can change you? That's a struggle with parents, I know. You're a parent. You believe the gospel, but really what you want out of little Jimmy is just be obedient, shut up and go to bed. I know that. But even with our kids, are we raising them according to the Word of the gospel or are we sort of teaching them something different? You have to ask yourself. So the question is, "How does our spiritual life begin?" It begins through God's initiative.

Well, the logical question Paul's asking is, "How do you think it ends?" What a lot of Christians would say, we're often taught or somehow we assume that, "Okay, God initiates with sinners, he brought me into the kingdom, he forgave my sins, and now I just need to keep my nose clean for the rest of my life and hopefully when I get to heaven this is all true. And even if Jesus' work wasn't good enough then maybe my good works will be enough. What do you think Paul is going to say about that? He says in verse 3,

³ *Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? (ESV)*

The footnote, if you use ESV, says “or are you ending with the flesh?” He says, “You began one way, do you really think you’re ending another way?” Unfortunately that’s how many of us live, isn’t it? Having begun by the Spirit, do you really think you’re going to finish some other way? So you didn’t have what it took before Jesus opened your eyes and saved you, but now suddenly you have what it takes? Or do you need to trust Jesus now? Do you need to trust Jesus to get you to the end?

Remember what Philippians 1:6 says? Or, remember what it doesn’t say? It doesn’t say, “He who began a good work in you put His feet up on a chair, just watching to see what you do for the rest of your life.” “He who began a good work in you, He’s just sitting up there watching, waiting for you to mess up.” Is that what it says? “He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it in the day of Christ Jesus.” This same person who began this work in you by his Spirit is the one who will complete this work in you by His Spirit. God is the one who’s responsible. What’s our responsibility? Our responsibility is to have faith. It’s to believe the gospel. It’s to preach the gospel to ourselves.

I hesitate saying this at the first service, but I did. I was on a television show on Friday with Leslie Braxton from down the street. He called me on Monday. Leslie Braxton is the pastor of the church about two blocks north of us, New Beginnings Christian Fellowship, if you’re not familiar with him. He said, “Hey, I’m hosting an hour and a half show on Friday morning and I’d like you to be one of the guests. I’m going to interview you for twenty minutes. Basically the question I’m going to ask you is, “How has the hard economic times changed the content of your preaching?” I got the message and I talked to Judy and I said, “I’m not sure I’m going to do it. Here’s the thing. If I have to wear a tie I’m not doing it.” He knows me pretty well because he left another message and he said, “By the way, you don’t need to wear a tie.” So I was the only one there without a tie. So it was three other pastors and me, and he interviewed us. I told the girls when I was driving them to school and they asked, “What is he going to interview you on?” I said, “He wants to know what the content of my preaching is during financial hard times.” One of the girls said, “That’s going to be a short interview.” They know me. Why? The content doesn’t change in hard times or in good times. I told them that. He asked me that question and I knew it was coming. I said, “It doesn’t change. The content of my preaching never changes but the application does sometimes.” He gave me the greatest compliment that I’ve ever gotten from another preacher. He told the other pastors there and he told the television, “That’s what I like about Tommy. Everything’s about Jesus. Every time I’ve heard him preach it’s about Jesus.” That’s what Paul is getting at when he says, “I publically portrayed Jesus before you.” That is the purpose of preaching. That is the purpose (Paul says) of the whole gospel, to constantly take you to Jesus. You enter the Christian life and you continue in the Christian life in exactly the same way, through faith in Jesus.

Remember Israel in Egypt? God promised He would deliver them from Egypt and into the Promised Land, and He delivered them from Egypt and yet after that it was pretty rocky. What was Israel’s problem? Israel’s problem was the same that you and I have. They believed God had saved them from their bondage, but they really weren’t sure that He was going to finish the job. So they complained. Which by the way as a side note, the root of most complaining is in the fact that you’re not really sure that God is going to finish the job, that you’re not really sure that God is in control of this situation or that God is going to take care of you through this or that. You can write a letter this week if you want. Just sign it. But I’d ask you before you do that to think through, “What is it about the gospel that I’m not believing? What is it about Jesus work for me that I’m not believing?” So Paul takes us from the beginning of our spiritual life, the end of our spiritual life, and he then goes and asks a question about the middle of our spiritual life. Notice what he says in verses 4 and 5.

⁴ Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? ⁵ Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— (ESV)

He's talking about their current spiritual life. He does something interesting. He actually is implicitly asking them to remember something. He says, "Did you suffer so many things in vain?" Another valid translation of "suffer" is simply "experience." "Did you experience so many things in vain?" We don't know if the Galatians were persecuted. We don't know that happened with them. But whether it's suffering or just experience, what Paul is calling them to do in order to make it through their every day life is to think through what's happened to them in the past. Has God been faithful to you in the past? In a church like this, one of the great things I tell people all the time, one of the benefits of our church is that it is multi-generational. It makes it infinitely more difficult to plan worship, I'll tell you that right now. But, I would rather have multi-generational church than a church that was easy to plan worship in, because every generation wants something different. That's what I'm getting at. What we have here that's a great thing is that you have people who have been Christians for 20, 30, 40 years who can look back. When someone like me can go to an old elder and ask, "Is all this in vain? Are we just wasting our time here?" A 60- or 70-year-old elder can say, "No, no, no, it wasn't in vain. Let me tell you how God has been faithful to this church." Think about your own life. Every person in here, if we had time, several days, we can have everyone come up here and tell their life story. And every person in here would tell their life story, and the rest of us would both laugh and cry the whole time because no one has a boring life, really if you're willing to listen to them. Think about all the faithfulnesses that God has shown to you. Some of you I know have had kids who have been very sick and you wondered if they would even live, and now they're back and they're healthy. You'd never know, all these things that God has done in your life, these miracles that God has done, the saving of your marriage. He'd do all these great things because you obeyed works of the law or because you had faith that he would do those things? That's almost a silly question isn't it after you think about all the rest of the things Paul has said? Has God taken care of my family? Has He provided for me? Did He do all that stuff because I was obedient? If anything, He did it in spite of my obedience. I can speak from my own life. But the answered prayers and the work in my life and the work in my family's life, the work in your life, Paul says, "That's an experience you shouldn't take lightly." Do remember that? Do you think back upon it? I encourage you this week to think back and ask yourself and maybe sit down with your family, "Let's just talk about some of the times God had been faithful to us."

I remember a CE [Christian Education] professor who told us the story about a pastor whose wife had gotten cancer. They operated and several months after was declared to be clean of cancer. Prayers were answered. On that day every day for the rest of that family's life, the kids took off from school, the parents got off work, and they celebrated God's faithfulness in delivering Mom from cancer. Do you do that? I don't do that very much. Celebrate the faithfulness that God has shown. How does all this end? Next week, Paul equates this with the faith that Abraham had. But all the things in our life, whether it's how our spiritual life begins, if you're not a Christian you need to look to the cross of Jesus. If you're wondering, "Am I going to make it through to the end?" Look to the cross of Jesus. If you're wondering, "Am I going to make it through the day?" Look at the cross of Jesus and nothing else.

I'll close with this. One of the shows the girls and I have been watching is called, "Pawn Stars." "Pawn Stars" on the History Channel is about this huge pawn shop in Las Vegas. What's cool about it is people bring in usually very valuable historical items like a Revolutionary War musket or silver made by Paul Revere. You hear him negotiating with the guy who owns the Pawn Shop, and when he's not sure, he'll bring in an expert. The expert will come in and he'll ask, "First of all is it a real Revolutionary War rifle?" He'll say, "Oh, yes, it is. It's the only one ever made of its kind." The owner will ask, "How much is it worth?" "Ten thousand dollars." You see the person who brought it in, their eyes light up. That's when the girls and I look over at each other, "How much do you think he's going to offer?" He has to low-ball him every time because he wants to make money in the pawn shop. So he'll go, "Ah, I'll give you a grand for it." He says, "He just said it's worth ten thousand bucks." "Yeah, if you put it on auction. You can go do it." You can tell how desperate someone is when they'll take a thousand.

One of the saddest episodes that I ever saw, a guy brought in a quilt that his grandmother had made.* When they had him in the parking they'll ask, "How much do you want to get for this thing? How much do you think you're going to ask for?" He said, "I don't know, man. I might be able to get a hundred grand for this thing." For a quilt! The reason he thought he would get that much for a quilt is for about forty years, from about 1930 to about 1970, his grandmother had sent six inch squares of cloth to every famous person in the world (John F. Kennedy was one of them) a self-addressed, stamped envelope. "President Kennedy, could you please sign my square of cloth and send it back? I'm making a quilt with signatures on it." So she had Kennedy, she had all of the presidents for that thirty or forty year period. Every famous movie star including Marilyn Monroe. She included famous athletes, everyone who was anything: Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr., Dean Martin, all those guys. She had all their signatures on the quilt. Rick brought an expert in and asked, "How much is this thing worth?" The expert looked at it and she was awe struck. She said, "This thing is priceless but I wouldn't pay a dime for it." She said, "On one hand it could be priceless, on the other hand it really actually is worthless." Why is it worthless? Because what Granny did is when she got Kennedy's signature on the white piece of cloth, she needle stitched over it. Every signature she did very accurate, completely accurate needle stitching over their signature on this beautiful quilt. But by needle stitching over the actual signatures she voided them. She made them completely worthless. I hope the guy didn't go out and harm himself he was so down. But you get the point. It's the same way with the gospel. When you add something to the finished work of Jesus in order for God to save you, you render it worthless. Just leave it like it is. It's the only thing that can help you. It's the only thing that can get you to the end. Think about that.

*Disclaimer – Pastor Tommy's memory of this December 2009 episode is a little different from the actual show. Interested readers can view the entire show at the three YouTube links below. Only the first and last links deal with the quilt story.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJ5tLBy0Lkc>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMtfzFzTDT4>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-BvuBPztk>