

Grace Works

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[0 : 0 0] Our Heavenly Father, as we turn to your Word, we pray that you would by your Spirit preach the Gospel to us. And may the Word of Christ so richly dwell in our hearts that we might live by faith even today.

For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, we're going back to Galatians. So if you would like to take your Bible and open to page 178, which Marian read for us a moment ago, as you do so, a small correction or addition to our parish family news.

You will notice that Dr. Bruce Hindmarsh has been promoted to full professor without term at Regent College. And we are enormously proud of Bruce for that honour and we want to take some credit for it.

So congratulations, Bruce. But what you don't know is that Dr. Craig Gay has also been promoted to full professor without term at Regent College.

And we can blame Canada Post for the delay on that news. And next week we may have to give him another honorary doctorate to apologise for the omission.

[1 : 1 4] Congratulations, Craig, to you as well. Yesterday our power went out. I guess many of you had a power blackout as well. And a wonderful thing to be in a country as cold as this and have a power blackout till about four in the afternoon.

And when the power comes on, every electronic gadget in the house comes back to life again. Clicking and clanging and winging and doing all sorts of things. And that's a bit like what it felt preparing on this passage this week.

I want to introduce it by saying this. The people in Galatia have a very practical problem. They had become Christians through the Apostle Paul and there'd been great joy.

They'd even suffered persecution bravely. The question for them was now what? They did not instantly become perfect. They still had difficulty with envy and anger and idolatry and struggled with lust and immorality and arrogance and greed.

And their very practical question was this. How do I go on in the Christian life? How do I get more love? How do I get more forgiveness? How do I grow in self-control?

[2 : 3 0] How do I go ahead? It's a question that presses on all of us. And of course there was a group of teachers from headquarters in Jerusalem who came bringing the latest cutting edge growth tool.

And they were very impressive and very sincere. And their simple answer was this. That the way you go forward as a Christian is you go back to the law. What God said to Moses is a beautiful and religious frame for your lives.

It will control what you eat and what you wear and what day you do what thing and all sorts of special religious observances. That is the way to go forward. And to the Galatians as well as to us Anglicans, that is very attractive.

One of the core problems for us as Christians, anyone who comes close to the Christian faith, I think we struggle with how radical the gospel of Jesus Christ is. It is the opposite of the way we think it ought to be.

The way we advance in the Christian life, says the apostle, is exactly the same way we entered the Christian life at the beginning. They're not two different things.

[3 : 3 9] We enter the same way that we grow. We begin the Christian life by faith. We live the Christian life by faith. And we end the Christian life by faith.

Let me remind you of what Paul said in the passage we looked at last time in Galatians. If you turn back to 3.1. O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?

Let me ask you only this. Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Verse 5. Does he, now we're in the present tense, does he who supplies the Spirit to you and work miracles among you, do so by works of the law or by hearing with faith?

Yes, but you see that is infuriatingly humbling to our pride. And I think it only gets worse as I get older as a Christian. It feels like there must be something I have to do if I know God utterly accepts me in the death of Jesus Christ.

But surely I've got to make a contribution. Surely I don't just grow by mere faith. And I think most of us think that we become Christians by faith, but that we grow by hard work and effort.

[5 : 00] And in these verses, 6 to 14, the Apostle wants us to see this amazing, remarkable thing that at the heart of the daily, hourly, practical life of the Christian is living by faith.

And what he does is he opens up a chasm in the passage and he says there are actually two ways to live. Both of them look very religious from the outside. In fact, looked at from the outside, they're very similar.

One is living by faith and the other is living by law or by works of the law. Let me just show you these two contrasts quickly.

In verse 7, it literally says, So you see that it is those of faith who are sons of Abraham. Verse 9, It is those who are of faith who are blessed with Abraham.

Then verse 10, the contrast for the second half of the passage, all who rely on works of the law, well, literally, all who are of works of the law are under a curse. Let's look at these two together.

[6 : 01] What does it mean to live of faith, in faith, based on faith, out of faith? And in verses 6 to 9, the Apostle uses Abraham as a brilliant illustration for those who want to go back to the Old Testament.

Because from beginning to end in Abraham's life, the big issue is not what a decent bloke he was, but the promise of God and whether Abraham believes. Verse 6, Thus Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Notice he doesn't believe, he doesn't believe in God, he doesn't, he can't, it's not just ticking the boxes on the creed. He believes God, he believes the words that God said to him.

And the promise of God came to him, came to Abraham and said specifically, salvation is not going to come from you, it's going to come from my intervention in your life.

And Abraham believed God's words, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. And that is an accounting word, it's a money word. God takes the funds from one account, and he reckons them into another account, so that what was not Abraham's is now Abraham's.

[7 : 13] He reckons it to him as righteousness. Abraham did not become righteous in himself, but through faith in the promise of God, it was reckoned to him, credited to him, transferred to him, and God treats him as righteous.

It's exactly the same for us. We are not righteous in our souls. In our heart of hearts, righteousness is not a quality which lives in us.

It is a gift of God, which is external to us, but we enjoy it by faith. It's the mark of true Christian faith to look in our hearts and see my own poverty and my own sinfulness, and cry out to mercy, and look to Jesus and his death for righteousness, not into my own life, which I know is absolutely contradictory to all the self-help books over the last 25 years.

But I want you to see something of the power of this. Paul quotes the Old Testament a number of times in this passage, and I just want to look at one of them with you. That quote in verse 6 comes from Genesis 15, and if you're tempted to go to sleep, just put your hand in Galatians 3 and go back to Genesis 15 with me, shall we?

Genesis 15. Look at this beautiful promise at the beginning of chapter 15. After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision.

[8 : 44] Fear not, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward. Isn't that a beautiful promise? Verse 6, he believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Now, here's the question. Where does the Abraham story begin? It's back in chapter 12. By chapter 15, there's a lot of water that has gone under the bridge, and in fact, a lot of the water that has gone under the bridge has been very muddy.

I mean, at the end of chapter 12, Abraham goes down to Egypt, and his wife is so beautiful. He's frightened that the king will kill him, so he calls her his sister, and the king marries Abraham's wife, which is an interesting story which I'm not going to preach on today, but it's a very wobbly thing for

Abraham to do, isn't it?

Read through the Abraham narrative. See how many times he wobbles. But here we are, chapter 15, and here's the point. Chapter 15 is in the middle of Abraham's life of faith.

He has been a believer for a long time. He's not beginning his life of faith. That is the point. That is why the apostle uses this verse.

[9 : 59] Paul goes back to Genesis 15, not to show how Abraham started in faith, but to show how he continued in faith. Go back to Galatians 3, verse 9 then.

Paul says, So then, it is those who are of faith who are blessed with Abraham who had faith. It's continuous.

It's ongoing. I say again, most of us think that we come into the kingdom by simple faith, but that we grow by trying hard. Test yourself. Have you ever said to yourself, I've been a Christian for 10 years, I ought not be so angry.

I ought to be more forgiving. I ought to try harder. I ought to not think those things. I ought to get my act together. What the apostle is saying here is that if you are having trouble with self-control, if you can't control your sexual appetites or you find it impossible to forgive yourself or forgive someone else, the only way to advance through that issue is exactly the same way we came to Christ in the very first place.

It is by having Christ Jesus and him crucified publicly portrayed before our eyes. It is as we see him that the Holy Spirit works on our hearts and gives us faith.

[11 : 16] The way we receive the Holy Spirit is by the hearing of faith. We already saw that in chapter 3. And so what we do is we go back, we go back again and again and again to the death of Jesus Christ and that is how we advance and that is how we grow.

It is through believing the gospel. And I want to just point out one stunning verse in verse 8 and I want to leave it with you as a little bit of homework. Verse 8, the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abram saying, in you shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.

Here's a homework exercise. How on earth can Paul say that scripture preached the gospel to Abraham when scripture wasn't written? I'm not sure and I look forward to your answers next week. I think what, at least it means that whenever we sit down and open the word of God, there is as much revealing power as when God spoke to Abraham from heaven because every time we open God's word, God preaches the gospel.

Every time we open the Bible, if we're reading Nehemiah, if we are reading the book of Judges, if we are reading the Psalms, God is preaching Christ Jesus and him crucified.

[12 : 32] That is the life of faith. Well, let's turn secondly and look briefly at the opposite. What does the life of the law look like? And I read just verse 10 here.

All who rely on works of the law are under a curse for it is written, Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law and do them.

Now, the problem for us who grew up in the West is that the word curse comes from B-grade movies. You know, the curse of the mummy, the curse of the man from outer space and those sorts of things.

When the Bible uses the word, it's speaking about our spiritual condition. The life of blessing is the life promised by God. But when we live out of works of the law, not out of faith, we turn from blessing to curse.

There is nothing wrong with the law of God. It is good and upright and wholesome. We should take delight in it. It was given to give shape and boundaries for our love for God.

[13 : 37] It's not opposed to faith. And if you have true Christian faith, it will show itself in works of the law. The issue is not whether we are trying to keep the law.

The issue is whether we are relying on the works of the law. You see, the law will justify every person who keeps every single part of it.

The problem is, we can't. Unless we keep all of it with all of our hearts, all the time, we are under the curse of God. That is why, you see, it's a completely frustrating and futile life to live one's life based on one's works of the law.

Of course, we seek to obey it and keep it. Again, that's not the issue. The issue is whether I live of the works of the law, resting on it, relying on it. The issue is not law-breaking or law-keeping, but law-relying.

It's one thing to live a good life, and I hope we all are. It is another thing to put our hope in that life, or to imagine that you stand before God because of that life, or imagine that you stand and look at the world in a decent way because of that life.

[14:49] I think every single one of us is tempted that even though we know the love of Jesus, we're always tempted, we're constantly tempted to rely on the works of the law. And the Apostle Paul says, it's a contradiction.

You can't do it. Our life is either relying on faith or relying on works of the law. And if we trust our works and if we trust our growth, if we trust in anything we do for salvation, we are under God's curse.

That's why we have to go back again and again and again to Jesus crucified. And I just want to show you as we finish in verses 13 and 14, that's exactly what the Apostle does.

It's a beautiful illustration of verse 1. He holds up Jesus Christ and Him crucified before us so that our hearts would be ravished, so that our faith would be attached to Him and not to ourselves.

Verse 13, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us. For it is written, cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree, that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

[16:09] Verse 13, he quotes Deuteronomy, cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree. It's speaking of the person who has been executed for blasphemy and then their body is hung on a tree as a sign that that person died under the curse of God.

And when God said those words in Deuteronomy 21, he had one person in mind. It was his only begotten Son. And what Paul says here is not merely that Jesus was punished for us.

It's not just that he was treated as sinful instead of us. Paul says he became a curse for us so that we might become a blessing.

This is so important for our day-by-day living. It's not just that when we come to Christ he wipes our slate clean and we are forgiven.

It's bigger than that. It is that God transfers the righteousness of Christ to us and we are regarded by God as beautiful, delightful, righteous.

[17:14] It's not that God just takes away our sin on Jesus and then says now you can have a second chance to prove yourself. Get a better record this time and we come back failure, failure, get the slate clean again and again and again.

Living that way puts the pressure on us to live based on works of the Lord. No, no, no. The Apostle said in 2 Corinthians 5 he became sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

All our righteousness does not come from our works. It comes from a swap and exchange. In the death of Jesus and this is why the death of Jesus is such a it's so important for us you see it's in the death of Jesus that God makes him curse makes him sin and makes us righteous all the righteousness of God and that is why the incredible importance in this passage of finance words there are three finance words I want to point out to you.

They're spreadsheet terms. When I was 18 I was dubiously elected to the church committee of our local parish. I was the youth representative on church committee and I remember the first meeting going to the first I didn't know what I was doing and our treasurer was Mr. Johnson.

Mr. Johnson had been treasurer for 38 years he was a wonderful guy and at the time when it came for budget money he pulled out his spreadsheet this was before computers they'd all been handwritten for everybody in the room and he pulled out this sheet and he treated it as though it was a very precious piece of linen like so and handed it round and it was a Hogwarts moment for me it was like magic Mr. Johnson would say well we had that 15,000 over here in the debit column but now we've moved it over to the income column.

[19:06] I just was amazed at how he could do those sorts of things and the church is doing very well still you'll be pleased to know. there are three spreadsheet words in this passage the first is this word reckoned in verse 6 he reckons us righteous transferring funds from one account to the other he transfers into our account the righteousness of Christ in verse 8 and 11 the word justify all of you accountants will know what that word means it's all placed to our credit the righteousness of Christ is placed to our credit the account now has our name on it and even more wonderfully in verse 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law it's an ordinary common garden word for going out of the house taking your money giving it to a shopkeeper and buying something and bringing it home and Paul is saying that God paid this price for us Christ redeemed us by giving by making himself a

curse and freely offering us his righteousness that's why to be of works of the law is a contradiction to being of faith we receive the righteousness and blessing of God not by works but by faith not just once but every day and every hour of every day this is the heart of the

Christian faith brothers and sisters it is substitution we try and substitute ourselves for God and God's response in his mercy and his love is to substitute himself for us and to take our curse that is why in the death of Jesus Christ we have resources we have never begun to realize it's not just an entry into eternal life it's not just a slate wiped clean it means that God gives us all the righteousness of Jesus us and he regards us as beautiful and it's not about beginning the Christian life this life of faith faith in what God has done begins the life continues the life it is faith that will bring us to the completion of the Christian life and so our exercise today is to place our faith in Jesus Christ is to hear the words of the gospel which God is preaching to us even now and to accept them by faith and what we're doing this morning as we come to the Lord's Supper and we come to the Lord's Table we remember that Jesus Christ was made he became a curse for us that we might become his righteousness and we reach our hands out and we receive the bread and we receive the wine and we feed on him in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving Amen Amen Amen