

Continuing in Faith

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[0:00] Before we go to God's Word, I did also want to mention that Erika Vedek has been elected! to be our clerk for the upcoming season as well. So thank you, Erika, for your serving in that role.

Tim Keller wrote in his book *Center Church*, One of Martin Luther's fundamental insights is that religion is the default mode of the human heart. Even irreligious people earn their acceptability and sense of worth by living up to their set of values. By religion, he means those who seek to obey God or to do good in order to be right with God. And by irreligious, he means those who reject God or the place of God in their lives and seek to live apart from Him. What he says is that the heart of all human beings have this inerring bent towards finding the works or the rules that we must do in order to be right and acceptable in the world. This is not only true for people far from church, but it's true, according to Keller, for people in church. So he goes on to say, the effects of, quote, works religion persist so stubbornly in the heart of Christians who believe the gospel at one level that they will continually revert to religion, operating at deeper levels as if they were saved by their works. What do we think about this thesis? How do we respond to it? Well, this is what the Apostle Paul wants to talk to us about this morning.

We are in our series in the book of Galatians. We're going to be looking at Galatians 3. You can turn there page 914 in the few Bibles if you want. Paul is addressing this very question. If you haven't been here just to catch you up, Paul has written this letter out of a great pastoral concern that the church in Galatians 3. He's been reading this letter out of the Bible. He's been reading this gospel that he preached to them, the one and true gospel of justification that is being made right with God by faith in Christ alone, apart from any works that we might do. And he's argued that through...for a number...from a number of different angles over the first two chapters. And then in chapter 3, he begins a new section by returning to his tone of pastoral warning and concern for the church.

So with that introduction, let's read chapter 3, verses 1 through 5, and ask for God's help as we look at God's Word together this morning.

[3:22] O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this. Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain, if indeed it was in vain? 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?

Let's pray and ask for God's help to understand his Word. Lord, we come to you this morning and we acknowledge, Lord, our need for you. Lord, we know that our hearts deceive us. We know, Lord, that we will often turn from you to other things. And so, Lord, we need you and your Word continually in our lives to instruct us, to lead us, to move our hearts to love the things that you love and hate the things that you hate, to move our hands to do the things that are good and right. Lord, to move our minds so we might think rightly about you. Lord, I pray for your help this morning. In my weakness, Lord, will you help me to proclaim your Word truthfully and faithfully. And Lord, may we together, by the power of your Spirit, receive your Word and let it do its work in our hearts. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. How do we address this default mode of religion or works-based acceptance with God in our hearts? We're going to look at this passage. We're going to walk through it with three steps. So, here's your outline if you're an outline person. First, we're going to look at the two ways

to live that Paul presents for us. The second thing we're going to explore is the pull or the draw to works-based living. And then the third point is the glory of our gospel alternative. So, that's what we're going to do this morning. So, we're going to start by recognizing that when Paul is arguing in this passage, he's presenting two ways to live, right? You see in even these short verses, these contrasts, right? Verse 2, there's, did you receive Spirit by the works of the law or by hearing with faith?

Did you receive by the Spirit or was it by the flesh that you began? In verse 3, verse 5 returns to this again. By the works of the law, did God do miracles among you or was it by hearing with faith? So, we see these two contrasting paths that he lays out. And this one path is characterized by the phrase, the works of works of the law. And we've seen this before, we've talked about it, but just to remind you, works of the law refers to the way that we are justified, as we've seen in the first two chapters, the way we're justified being made right with God. And the primary and first application of this is the question of the Mosaic law, because many of the early Christians were Jewish in background.

And so, they had held and grown up with the Mosaic law, and they were trying to figure out where does the Mosaic law fit into this? And there were some, as we read earlier in Acts 11, there were some who wanted to continue to say the works of the law, doing the law was necessary. We need to be circumcised.

[7:37] We need to keep the Sabbath. We need to keep the dietary laws. In fact, we have to keep the whole law of Moses in order to be a good member of the people of God, a good Christian. And so, this was the primary application in the first century to this concept of the works of the law. But as you've heard from Tim Keller, and as you've heard from us over, we've expanded this. And some of you have asked, well, isn't that, is that right? Can't, shouldn't we just limit this to being about the law? And most of us are not tempted to keep the Jewish dietary laws today, I don't think. Maybe there are a few of you.

You can come talk to me afterwards if you want to talk about that. But most of us, this is not true. The reason why we've expanded our understanding of it is because I think the Bible does it as well. The clearest example of this would be Romans 3, and I can't preach through the whole book now, but in, or Romans 1 through 3. Because in the beginning of Romans, what Paul argues is that those who have the law of God, that is, Jews, can't be righteous before God because they can't keep the law because of their sin. And the Gentiles who don't have the law of God and don't know, you know what they can't do? They can't be righteous before God either. They can't even keep their own law, let alone the law that they're not familiar of. And so, his conclusion in chapter 3 is, there is no one righteous. No one can stand before a holy God and say, I have righteousness that gives me standing before you.

And so, given this understanding of Paul's use of works, then when we read something like in Ephesians 2, 8 and 9, right, for it is by grace you have been saved through faith, not of works so that no one may boast. It is the gift of God. We think that the idea of this works of the law can be expanded to be all the human ways in which we want to make ourselves right with God by the things that we do. Okay? So, this is what we mean when we talk about the works of the law, and I believe it's what Paul is referring to. Now, in verse 3, he uses a different word, right?

He uses flesh rather than the works of the law. Well, flesh is used throughout, particularly the rest of the book of Galatians, to refer to our human sinful impulses, right? Some people think it's referring very narrowly to the act of circumcision. I don't think that's the right read, particularly when you look on and you look at chapter 5, the works of the flesh are envy and fighting and gossip and unrighteousness and sexual immorality and all sorts of things, right? It's basically a word that Paul uses to summarize the human impulse to live outside of God's intended ways for us, to pursue life that's destructive because it's contrary to His commands.

[11:00] And ultimately, at the root of sin, we see that it's a self-dependent, self-referential, and self-pleasing impulse. So, Paul says, this is one way, the works of the law are the works of faith, or there's an alternative, right? But, it says this, let me ask you this, did you receive the Spirit? I'm sorry, it says this, let me ask you this, did you receive the Spirit? I'm sorry, that's verse 2. Verse 3 says, are

you so foolish, having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

Now, Paul's going to have a lot more to say about the Holy Spirit as we keep going in Galatians, so I'm going to put a pin in all that that means. But here, specifically, he's referring to the passage that was read earlier, that the sign of a new believer in the first century was that they had received the Holy Spirit. And the Jews thought God was giving them the Holy Spirit, poured out on them on Pentecost as the new people of God, and thought, well, yeah, this is for the Jews. And then, the question is, well, can the Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit too? And Peter testified powerfully, yes, of course. Those who believe the message of Jesus received the Spirit of God in the moment of their salvation as they believed in Christ. This is what we saw. And so, hearing by faith comes with the gift of the Spirit, and so Paul pulls these ideas together and says, this is the new way. This is the alternative to the ways of the works of the law. And in this passage in verse 3, I want to draw out this is where the key of this whole argument is. He says, are you now being perfected by the flesh? This perfection is talking about not the entrance into the being the people of God, but how do we continue? How do we get to the end for which God created us? He saved us so that we would be His people.

How do we pursue that? How do we do that? Paul says, having begun by faith, do we continue by our works? And you may have noticed this, but this whole section is a series of rhetorical questions. And the rhetorical questions mean that there's a very obvious answer. And the obvious answer for Paul is no.

Of course, if you begun by faith, why would you continue on some other path? But before we get to the goodness of that path, I want to spend some time exploring the first way.

[14:10] Why is it that we are so prone to want to live a works-based religion kind of life? Why are we prone to legalism? We see it so often. We've seen it in Galatians. Peter says, well, you know, I think I got to eat with the Jews and separate from the Gentiles. And I'm doing this maybe out of good motives, maybe out of selfish motives. But however he did it, he gave in to this, to importing a legalistic requirement into the people of God again. The motivation here may be a misguided attempt to honor God, but it denies the fact that when Jesus came, He continually challenged those who sought to justify themselves by the works of the law. In fact, He said, I am the fulfillment of the law.

I'm not here to extend it, but I'm here to complete it in all sorts of ways that I can't get into this morning because that's a whole other sermon on how Jesus is the fulfillment of the law. But Jesus said, the law was given to point to me, and what happens now flows from me and what I have done for you.

And again, there's a whole theology of the use of the law in the life of a Christian. It's another sermon, not this one. So just if you're worried about that, yes, there are places where the law teaches us about God's righteousness and teaches us about His character in all sorts of ways. But we need to be careful to filter it through Jesus and through the New Testament. We have this inerring bent, Martin Luther tells us through Tim Keller, to love this kind of works-based religion. It started in the first century, and I think it continues today. So Richard Loveless, a theologian in the 20th century, describes this. He says, many Christians today have a theoretical commitment to the doctrine of grace, but in their day-to-day existence, they rely on their sanctification for their justification. Sanctification being the how do we keep going for justification, how do we get in? Drawing their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance, or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience.

sincerity, past experience, recent religious performance, relative infrequency of sin. How many of us are prone to think, that's what makes me acceptable to God?

[17:29] These things I can do. I can control. I can monitor. I can gauge. And we love it because it gives us a good standing before God. And we are so tempted to do this. We're so tempted to think along the lines of work-based religion. Let me try out some things. This is, I'm stealing from Keller a lot in the sermon. I'm just going to say that out front. Here's some thought process that maybe you think, right? We obey God, and

therefore we're accepted by God.

We do good things because we have a fear or insecurity that God won't give us good things without them. When circumstances go wrong, we get angry at God or ourselves because we believe that anyone who's lived a pretty good life deserves a comfortable life.

When we are criticized, we get angry or we are devastated because it's so important for us to think about ourselves as a good person so that God can accept us.

If and when we live up to our standards or what we think are God's standards, we feel confident.

But then are prone to be proud and unsympathetic to those who fail.

And if and when we are not living up to our standards or God's, we feel insecure and inadequate, and we feel like a failure before God and others.

[19:17] Let me delve into a semi-hypothetical example. And I say semi because I'm not thinking of a particular example, but this is reality in my own home, in my own life. My wife mentions to me that there's something that I have not done that I said I would do. This happens. This is true.

If I have made good works the basis of my life and my relationships, then this loving correction provokes works-based thinking in me. I often respond defensively, maybe angrily, maybe lashing out. I certainly summon my inner lawyer and think of all the good things that I do do, and I justify myself, and I excuse my failure. I might unleash my inner lawyer as the district attorney to accuse her instead, to make myself look better by saying, well, there are all the things you aren't doing. I might alternatively take her words as a global condemnation of my good husband worth, and internalizing that, I might blame myself, withdraw from her, and tend towards depression.

This is what good works thinking does in my life and in my relationship. I wonder if that's true for you.

In your work as a student, how do you navigate success and failure? In your career path, what happens when you are overlooked or when you are praised? In your friendships and your family relationships, what happens when you fail and what happens when you succeed? In your serving in the world and doing good things for the sake of others, how do you navigate this justifying heart tendency?

[21:42] We all have this pull, I believe. And at the root of it, there may be a number of different things, but one of the things I think it is, is that we love legalism, we love work-based religion, because it allows us to be in control. Because if we can create a checklist and say, I've done this, I've done this, I've done this, I've done this, and then take it and present it to God and say, see, it's good enough, right? We love that because there's an end to that list.

And when we succeed, then we can be proud, then we can be confident, feel like we have standing with God, but then we fail, and our fears and our anger and our self-condemnation raise up.

So we love this, even though there's a love-hate relationship with it. And this is the pull, I believe.

This is why we love. It goes all the way back to the garden. Adam and Eve said, thanks God for the rule, but we'd like to make our own rules. We'd like to be able to say, we can do this on our own.

This, my friends, is what Paul would save the Galatians from. This is why his tone, he calls them foolish twice in this. This is going back to his beginning argument about them departing from the gospel. He's saying, there's a better way, there's another way. It's a way that you've already known because I've publicly told you about it. You remember what you heard? The alternative is justification by grace through faith as the basis of our ongoing relationship with God. And our practice of sanctification continues in grace by faith in Jesus as well. And this is the good news. And friends, this is what the rest of the book of Galatians is going to tell us about, that when we walk by faith in Jesus Christ, when we have a new life with Him, we have a new identity being a member of Christ's family, freely welcomed. We have a new confidence because we know that God's promises have been fulfilled. We have a new freedom from our self-justifying patterns to a self-giving life of love towards others. We have a new power moving from self-dependence and our own weakness to depending on God and His Spirit to do in us what we can't do so that we could actually please God and do good in the world. We have a new way of life. We live by faith. And if you were here last week, you remember Pastor Nick talked about this when he talked about verse 20 of chapter 2. I've been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me and the life I now live

in the flesh, this is a different use of flesh. This just means in my human body, the life that I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me. We know we've died to our... when we know that we've died to our desire to control and to rely on our works, when we've repented of all those things and turned to Jesus knowing we have nothing to bring, then there is a whole new life that we find as we live by faith. Instead of obeying God in order to be accepted, we obey God because we've been accepted and because we love Him and want to please Him. Instead of doing good out of fear and insecurity, we do it from the confidence that God has given us all things, and so we are able to do good because He has done all the good to us that we will ever need for life. When the circumstances of our life go wrong, we can trust in God rather than being angry or self-condemning. We can find fellowship with Christ in our sufferings because He has suffered for us. When we are criticized, rather than being angry or defensive, we can confess our sins and our failings because we've been forgiven in Christ. When we are able to live according to God's standards, we can humbly give thanks for His work of grace in us and be patient and gracious with others.

[26:40] And when we fail to meet those standards, we return to the grace of God that we are not accepted because we are perfect, but only because Christ is perfect for us, and we can confess our sins and be forgiven of them and be cleansed from their power, and then we can walk with Him. This is the new life that God has for us by faith. Let me go back to my example. My wife comes to me with a reminder of something that I haven't done, and I feel all those self-justifying dynamics hard, but then I remember Jesus, and I turn to Him, right? And I say, God help me. God help me to know. Instead of being angry and defensive or pulling up my inner lawyer to justify myself, I can say, thank you for reminding me of this. I don't need to be justified. I'm sorry that I haven't done this yet. It was wrong. Will you forgive me? Rather than attacking her or pulling away, I can move towards her. You're right. We need to get this done. How can we do that?

I'm sorry I hadn't done it yet. And the power that I have to do that is because I'm reminded that Jesus accepts me, and this moment of failure doesn't define me. This moment of sin is not the last word, but it's Christ's righteousness that is the last word. And instead of trying to control how my wife sees me or how I think I see myself before her or before God, I can let go of my reputation because I already have it in Christ, because Christ has died for me to make me a child of God. I'm able to look at Jesus on the cross. I'm a sinner saved by grace, that only Jesus lived the perfect life, that He died to set me free from sin, but that when I sin, I can confess my sin and repent of it and find that He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Do you see what a life of faith... Because I haven't done anything different except remember what I've already said I believe, that Jesus died on the cross for my sins, and because of that I am justified and made right before Christ. And that's not just in the past. That helps me today to live a gospel-centered life that God wants us to know and to live, not this sliding back into works-based religion, but finding this new and better way. And friends, some of you have asked me, but aren't we supposed to do good works as Christians? Yes, here's the good news. We will do good works, but it will produce in us an obedience that comes from faith because we love God and we want to do what He calls us to do. Even when we don't humanly feel like it when we're tired or when we're grumpy and when we don't want to. The power of the gospel that Jesus has died for us will motivate us to persevere in doing good works. We will have a passionate desire to develop a deeper relationship with God. We will pour out our lives in service to others. All of this will flow because we know who we are in Christ, because of all that is done for us and the riches that we have knowing that in

Christ we have a standing that is unassailable and unchanging. And this then becomes the fountain that overflows in our lives so that Christians ought to live good lives. And we should live good lives, and we will live good lives as we keep this gospel truth central in our lives.

This is what He says in verse 5. Do you remember? The miracle of the gospel? God worked in your life. Why?

[31:23] Because you did the works of the law? No, of course not. Because you heard the word by faith. And let's continue to hear the word by faith

and let it do its work in our hearts.

And friends, let us learn the practical application of the gospel in the middle of the disappointments at work and the conflicts at home, the rejections that strike deep, the struggles that feel overwhelming. The gospel of justification by faith gives us what we need to be able to respond and walk in faith in Christ and allow that to change us. We don't have to live on the hamster wheel of works-based religion where we just have to keep performing and wonder if it's good enough. We no longer have to live on the thin ice of uncertain acceptance with God. But because of Christ, we can stand firm, whole, confident.

Friends, maybe for some of you, this is the life that you have longed for but never tasted. I call you this morning. Today may be the day. Pray to God. Confess your sin and your utter inability to justify yourself. Repent of all these things that you do to try to make God accept you on your own terms and put your trust in Jesus that He has died on the cross for your sins and been raised for your justification. Maybe some of you thinking, I'm one of those people who started well, but man, I've fallen into this works-based thinking that this is what the Christian life is meant to be.

Friends, this is why we come here every Sunday and why we preach Jesus Christ crucified every Sunday because we, not just you, but me, we need to be reminded every day of the gospel that we first heard. We need to be reminded of this gospel over and over again and apply it to different parts of our life every week, but we need to be constantly reminded of these things. And my prayer is that we would truly be a gospel-centered church, and that means we remind ourselves not only as we gather here on Sunday mornings, but as we go away in your devotional times, reading the Word of God, in your fellowship, in your family devotions, in your coffee dates, in your workout jams, whatever it is, as you live your life, as you serve one another, as you live in the world that God has called you to, take this gospel with you and remind yourself and preach the gospel to yourself every day.

I am a sinner saved by grace. I am justified by faith in Jesus Christ. May this be the fuel and the treasure and the good news that captures your heart as you pursue a life of faith with Him. Let's pray together. Lord, thank You for this Word. Oh, Lord, how we need it.

[35:07] Lord, I pray that by Your Holy Spirit, You would show us, Lord, show us today where we need to apply this gospel, how we can continue, not by trying to overcome failure or trial or hardship on our own, but how we can by faith turn to You and find in You a new way to live in the midst of these things.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.