

THE REAL THING

SERIES: GALATIANS

By Steve Zeisler

The single overwhelming fact of history is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. There is no military battle, no geographical exploration, no scientific discovery, no literary creation, no artistic achievement, no moral heroism that compares with it. It is unique, massive, monumental, unprecedented and unparalleled. The cross of Christ is not a small secret that may or may not get out. The cross of Christ is not a minor incident in the political history of the first century that is a nice illustration of courage. It is the center.

So writes Eugene Peterson, commenting on the book of Galatians. The cross of Christ is the very center of history, and it is certainly the very center of the book of Galatians, the apostle Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia.

We have already seen that the cross of Christ is supremely antagonistic toward man-made religion. It spells the end of hypocrisy, phoniness, hype, shallowness and compromise. The cross of Christ, at the center of our spiritual experience, insists on reality, on our facing ourselves honestly and deeply. It forces us to face the tragedy that exists within us and the death-deserving choices we have made. Further, the cross of Christ insists that life is greater than death; that Jesus joined us in our condemnation, and that it is by means of his death that we live. The cross demands that we hate sin more deeply than we ever have before; and that we live life more fully than we would have if only man-made religion were the center of our spiritual experience.

This morning we start a new section in the book, beginning with Galatians 3:1:

You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?

"You foolish Galatians," the apostle charges, "are without excuse. The truth of the cross of Christ was placarded in plain view before you. Any running away from that, any settling for less deserves censure. You understood the issues. There is no reason for choosing human religion in place of the cross because it was made clear to you what you were doing."

That statement ought to penetrate us as well. Nobody in this church has any real excuse for serving man rather than God. Too much truth, insight and clarity are available to us. In Galatians 1:6, Paul declares that choosing to serve man rather than God is dastardly "desertion" of our Commander. Here he calls it "foolishness," an occult-induced blindness, a "bewitchment." Only the strongest terms should apply to those who would reject the cross of the Lord for anything else.

With the question, "You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you?" ringing in their ears, Paul now launches into a series of persuasions, each slightly different in its approach, but all having as their common thread the desire to persuade us, to teach us, to impart to our minds the wisdom and insight to see the issues at stake and to make the right choices. Not only should we react emotionally against false religion, but we ought to understand it; we ought to have both the solid information of

Scripture and the testimony of our own experience. Thus in this series of persuasions we are given an analysis that will help us to resist the temptation to live as the “foolish Galatians” were being tempted to live.

In the section of the book that runs from Galatians 1:3-5:1, the apostle details five very persuasive arguments. The first (Gal. 3:2-5) is based on the Christian’s experience; the second involves the plain declaration of Scripture (Gal. 3:6-14); the third is an appeal to common sense (Gal. 3:15-22); Galatians 3:23-4:11 is a parenthesis answering a question about the purpose of the Law]; the fourth is an argument based on the nature of love relationships in the body of Christ (Gal. 4:12-20); while the fifth is an argument based on the resonating themes that run all through the Bible (Gal. 4:21-5:1). We are going to look at these several arguments in the weeks ahead. Each will seek to persuade us, teach us and enlighten us as to the reasons why we should resist what is untrue and embrace what is true. Let us be persuaded, let us listen carefully, open our minds, with correct thinking as our foundation, so that we may be protected from the foolishness that was threatening the Galatian churches.

Galatians 3:1-5:1 further lists a series of competing statements where in each case two opposing notions are placed in contradiction to each other. All of these statements describe the same contradiction, the same dichotomy, but different language is used to illustrate each. For example, we are told to choose between “the works of the Law” and “hearing with faith”; between “the Spirit” and “the flesh”; between “the blessing” and “the curse”; between “the Law” and “the promise”; between “sonship” and “slavery.” What is under discussion in these dichotomies, therefore, is the difference between “religion that is of the people, by the people, and for the people,” as it were, versus religion that has as its center the very heart of God.

This morning we will look at the first two of these arguments: first, the argument based on our experience of the Spirit of God; and secondly, the argument based on the plain declaration of Scripture. Galatians 3:2:

This is the only thing I want to find out from you: 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 [“experience” may be a better translation] so many things in vain--if indeed it was in vain? Does He then, who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?

Paul begins by asking his readers to examine their own Christian experience. “What have you learned in the months and years that you have walked with your Lord? As you thoughtfully examine your Christian experience, what does it teach you? In particular, how does the Spirit of God himself work in your life, and what have you learned from your experience with him?”

Many Christians are distinctly uncomfortable for one of two reasons as they contemplate that question. Some may be uncomfortable because they have never, or rarely, sensed anything of the Spirit in their lives; their Christianity is limited to a dry orthodoxy that almost precludes any touch of the Living God in their experience. Others are uncomfortable with this question because their experience of the Spirit has consisted of irrational emotion and nothing else. Their experience, what they have been taught, what they have seen and lived is so filled with emotion that it does not make any sense to them and so cannot be examined.

Thus, as Christians from both of these camps contemplate their Christian experience they find that they have learned nothing, either because of dryness or irrational ecstasy. Paul is saying that Christians ought to have been touched by the

Spirit. He should be real to us. We should be able to understand our experience of him, and draw some conclusions from that.

The apostle holds that there are two things that ought to be true of us regarding our life in the Spirit. First, that we did receive him (Gal. 3:2) and secondly, that He (God the Father) “provides us with the Spirit and works miracles among us” (Gal. 3:5). Notice that the first of these things is spoken of in the past tense. We did receive the Holy Spirit. At one point in our life we had a watershed experience; we crossed over a barrier. We who once were children of darkness became children of light, sons and daughters of the living God. Precisely at that point, that moment when we crossed the threshold, the Spirit of God took up residence in us. We became what Paul terms in Corinthians, “temples of the Holy Spirit,” the place where the Spirit of God lives. Every Christian has had that experience. They are no longer what they once were. Jesus statement to Nicodemus that he must be “born again” makes sense to people in whom the Spirit resides. They were transformed as if by new birth.

It is possible that your coming to Christ may have happened almost without your being able to perceive it. You may have been raised in a Christian home and came to Christ over such a long period of time that you cannot actually identify the moment when you were born again. Some, on the other hand, know the exact moment when they came to Christ and received the Spirit; the hour when they rejected hedonism, intellectual arrogance or whatever, and became sons or daughters of God.

Some of you may have had a similar experience as those in Acts 19. There we read of a group of people who wanted to believe, who had heard of and believed in the baptism of John, who embraced truth when they heard it, but they always came up short because they were unaware of God’s full provision for them. There are many in this congregation who sought a satisfying relationship with God; believed the little truth they had been given, but did not actually come to know Christ for a long time. New birth can happen in different ways for different people, but the point is that if you are a Christian you have received the Spirit.

That ought to make a discernible difference in your life. Sin should have become increasingly painful to you precisely because the Spirit of God lives in you. You can no longer be comfortable with thinking and doing things you did in the past. Looking back at the time you became a Christian, you should realize that prayer is authentic and personal in a way that it never was before. Something about you has irrevocably changed, and you ought to be able to draw conclusions from that. That is the point the apostle is making here.

The second thing which the apostle holds should be true in our experience now that we are Christians is that God the Father “works miracles among us” (“works powerfully,” actually). That is worded in the present tense for a good reason. We did receive the Spirit in the past. In an ongoing way, our Heavenly Father makes provision of the Spirit for us. And as the activity of the Spirit of God continues, there ought to be powerful intrusions of his Spirit--miracles, if you will--in our Christian life. We ought to have some sense that he is still working, that he has not merely made us alive, set us on our way and ignored us for the rest of our lives, but that he remains an active participant in our daily experience. That is what our Christianity ought to manifest.

The provision of the Spirit may at times involve altering the process of nature, may involve transcending the physical laws so that healings occur instantaneously, jail cells are flung open by angels, or visions are given to the people of God. Some of you have experienced some such manifestations. More frequent, however, are the miracles involving changes of character, where God so changes people there is no way to account for it apart from the powerful working of the Spirit of God.

Those of us who attended the recent PBC Family Camp witnessed a positive display of works of power, of provision of the Spirit. What a remarkable weekend we had! There were people at the camp who a year or two ago were in prison in Poland; there were refugees from Vietnam who could not speak English. A number of people from this church who are just making ends meet were there; while there were others present who are very wealthy, who live many strata above the poor in terms of their daily existence. Yet, despite all that diversity of background, the language barriers, the things that would tend to separate us in terms of finances, where we live and with whom we associate, there was a remarkable oneness at that camp. There was a sense of unity, love and joy. Every time I turned around the Spirit of God was acting in power among us. New Christians, people who up until recently had lived selfishly and with total unconcern for others, came to the camp specifically to serve others, to baby-sit so that parents were free to enjoy leisure time, etc. There is no other way to account for what happened that weekend except to say that the Spirit of God was working miracles among us.

We need to expect that real Christianity, authentic Christianity, has about it the activity of God. His care for us and involvement with us ought not be just a distant memory. What Paul is saying is that the Spirit we received is “ongoingly” provided for us so that there is a vitality about our faith. And it is a vitality we can learn from. We ought to be able to examine it and draw conclusions from it. It ought to be exciting and frightening and remarkable to be the temple of the Holy Spirit.

No wonder the apostle asks of his readers, “Given all this, given the fact that your experience with the Spirit of God is energizing, are you so foolish as to think that what was begun by the Spirit must now be perfected by the flesh? Has your experience been totally in vain?” In other words, if the vitality of the Spirit comes by faith, then why on earth would you ever reject that for a second-class religion that does not have anything of the Spirit of God in it?

I can count many times when I dropped names to impress people, or quoted phrases in Greek or Hebrew--not even knowing what I was saying half the time--just to impress somebody listening to me. I have books in my library which I probably will never read but which create a certain impression when people see them. I can think of so many things I have done merely because I wanted to look good in the eyes of others. But I have never once seen the Spirit of God respond to any of that. I have prayed in public, I have read the Bible in a conspicuous fashion, I have feigned enthusiasm for projects that I knew were a waste of time, I have done all sorts of things merely because I wanted to make a favorable impression. But God has never once responded to any of my machinations; he has never illuminated them with his Spirit. He has never taken my fleshly attempts at being religious and made anything of them. Most of the memories are embarrassing; while those that are not embarrassing are worse than that.

On the other hand, I can remember times in my own experience where the Lord has opened my eyes and my ears and given me a clear sense of what he wanted me to do; and, sometimes with fear and trepidation, I have believed him. That is the other option, what Paul calls “hearing with faith.” I heard what the Lord called me to, I believed him for it, and some remarkable things transpired as a result--entertaining strangers, rejecting sinful fantasies, and so on. Just last week I was a participant in a small but thrilling moment. I had a conversation with a young woman who has had a lengthy church background but no real understanding of the Christian life. As we talked, some of the things I said to her had such an impact that her eyes lit up and she said, “I never heard that before. I never in all my life heard that.” As I pointed out to her truths from the Bible, repeating things that God had said, it seemed that a light went on in her mind. That was the powerful Spirit of God at work. In all my life, however, I have never once seen God respond to my attempts to look good.

That is what Paul is saying here. We ought to be able to look at our experience, to be able to examine the years, months--even days, if that is all you have had, and draw some conclusions from it. And one conclusion is that our God is powerful. He works among us, providing us with his direction and his power; we have received him and we have been changed by

him. But he has never, ever responded to our desire to look good in somebody else's eyes. He does not validate that kind of choice, which we all make at one time or another. When we hear the truth and believe him and him alone and act on that belief, suddenly we find he is there. That has certainly been my experience. I am persuaded by Paul's argument: "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" I am persuaded by an examination of my own experience.

Beginning in Galatians 3:6 we have Paul's second argument--a rather convoluted one this time. He introduces a Bible study, and a particularly Jewish one at that. His method of reasoning here may seem a little unfamiliar to us, but I think we can easily get the main thrust of it. The apostle is saying that not only our own experience, but the Scriptures themselves plainly teach that a cross-centered religion, one that is based on loving God more than man, is the declaration of the Word, what God has always said he would do. The Bible teaches it, is Paul's second argument. Galatians 3:6:

Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith that are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the nations shall be blessed in you." So then those who are of faith are blessed in Abraham, the believer. For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed is every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, to perform them." Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, "The righteous man shall live by faith." However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary. "He who practices them shall live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us --for it is written, "Cursed is every one who hangs on a tree"--in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Here again there are two different groups of people in view. First, there is the group who are characterized as being under God's blessing; and secondly, there is the group who are characterized as being cursed. In a masterstroke by the apostle, the first group are called, "sons of Abraham" (Gal. 3:7). Remember that he had been arguing against a group of legalists, a group of lawgivers from Jerusalem who have tried to hang the history and the culture of the Jews on Gentiles. But here Paul goes back to the very foundation of what it means to be a Jew, and that is, to be a "son of Abraham," a legitimate descendant of Abraham. Thus Paul is declaring that it is those who have the faith that Abraham had who are his children. As Paul delineates the argument, all blessing and favor from God come by faith--the faith that Abraham had--and not by works of the Law.

Paul outlines three reasons for this. First, that is what happened to Abraham: his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness. Secondly, it was promised to Abraham that the blessing of God would come to all nations, Gentile and Jew alike, through him. And thirdly, Paul quotes the prophet Habakkuk, declaring the universally applicable principle that "the righteous shall live by faith." The Bible teaches that the blessing of God, sonship of Abraham, comes to those who exercise faith.

Conversely, the apostle declares that the curse rests on those who live by the Law: "He who practices them shall live by them." There is no faith involved in that; it is a religion based only on precise measurements. But on those people rest the curse: "Cursed is every one who does not abide by all the things written in the Book of the Law to perform them." If your system of religion is based on being meticulously right every time, then once you miss the mark, once you fail, the curse of God rests upon you.

Have you ever failed to remember your exact number when you tried to draw money from an automatic teller machine? It doesn't matter who you are, what you look like, what identification you produce, if you don't get the exact sequence correct every time you get no money, no life; you are rejected. If you are dealing with a real bank teller, however, in a personal interaction, with a little exercise of faith on both sides you may be able to persuade her by your signature, your smile, the fact that you have been doing business there for 15 years, whatever, that you are, in fact, who you claim to be, and thereby make a withdrawal. The latter system has about it the efficacy of an interchange between persons.

Your heart condition matters!--what you are like and what changes have been made inside you. All those things are manifest in a relationship between people. But the mechanical process, the process that demands, "Do it exactly right or else," rejects any semblance of failure. That is the apostle's argument. The Bible teaches that righteous people have always lived in a faith relationship with God. But if you want to go with Plan B, then don't ever fail even once, because if you get one digit wrong you are rejected.

Thus our own personal experience of life lived in the Spirit of God teaches us that God responds to faith, not spiritual pushups, or our best efforts at pleasing him. The Scriptures teach us the same. Abraham was reckoned as righteous because of his faith, and he was promised that the Gentiles would receive the same blessing through him. Habakkuk announced that it is a clear intention and a principle of God to bless, to impute righteousness on the basis of faith. So all through the Scriptures we learn that God responds to faith, but that the other system, the system of Law works brings only condemnation and cursing.

The result of this Bible study is seen in Galatians 3:14: "In order that [I tell you these things] in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." In order that life in the Spirit might be ours through faith, in other words. We need to be persuaded of this. We not only need to feel the tension that Paul felt, not only to get worked up and passionate about these things, but to be persuaded that they are true as well. We need to have our minds changed because ultimately one of the great defenses of God against blindness and failure is to know what is true and what is not true; to not only feel the truth but to understand it. We ought to learn from our experience, and we need to learn from the Scripture that God has always, unfailingly, been concerned with faith, not with appearances.

"Beauty" and "glamour" are two words that on the surface seem to mean the same thing, but there is a vast difference between them. Glamour, which forever needs to be powdered and coifed, quickly fades in bright light. Beauty, on the other hand, lasts, and becomes even more beautiful no matter how closely it is examined. This true beauty is the quality King Solomon found in Shulamite, his wife. He sings of it in his remarkable love poem to her--The Song of Songs in the Old Testament. In the beginning of that book Shulamite looks at herself. She is a country girl, her skin is sunburned, there is a kind of rural ordinariness about her. She does not have any of the stately glamour of the courtiers, and she pleads that what she considers her unacceptable appearance not be held against her. But later in the book Solomon describes her in these words (Song of Solomon 6:8-10):

Sixty queens there may be and eighty concubines,
And virgins beyond number
But my dove, my perfect one,
is unique....
The maidens saw her and called her blessed,
The queens and the concubines praised her,
Who is this that appears like the dawn,
Fair as the moon, Bright as the sun,
Majestic as the stars in procession?

Shulamite was worried that her appearance was unacceptable, but Solomon saw in her great beauty, magnificent outer and inner beauty, and his own heart was deeply attracted to her. That is the difference between beauty and glamour. Glamour will not last, but beauty will retain and even expand its qualities.

In the same way real Christianity is beautiful, not glamorous. Religion that is based on human effort may very well be glamorous--it may produce a short-run attractiveness and excitement--but it is not of the cross. It has no depth. It will not last.

What we are being called to in this section of the book of Galatians is to choose real beauty, even if we are worried that the courtiers, the impressive people, might look down on us. We must choose real inner beauty and reject that which is only glamorous because in the long run honor accrues only to those who are spiritually beautiful.

I urge you to be persuaded in your mind that both an examination of your life and an examination of the Bible will incline you to a cross-centered spiritual life... "that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith."

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