REDEEMED BY FAITH IN CHRIST

Galatians 3:1-29
Key Verse: 3:13

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’”

In the last passage, we studied how Paul was distressed and angry because his Galatian sheep were following another gospel, one that proclaimed observance of the law ahead of faith in Christ. The Galatians had been led astray by some false teachers, who insisted that Jewish law and tradition was superior. These men looked so holy and clean compared to Paul, who was hungry and tired and losing his hair because of his concern for all the churches of God. But Paul was not intimidated by these men. Paul taught the Galatians that the gospel they received from him came directly from Christ Jesus by revelation. He was recognized by the pillars of the church as appointed by God to preach to the Gentiles. And he was the faithful defender of the Gentile believers against those who in their hypocrisy judged them by Jewish standards, even when it was St. Peter who did so. Paul had been a zealous Jew and a Pharisee’s Pharisee by human standards. He became the hardest working apostle. But Paul knew that observance of the law had not justified him before God, nor had his labors for Christ. He testified to the Galatians: “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (2:20) Paul was justified and could live before God solely because of what Christ did for him on the cross. In this world, we struggle hard because of the pressure we feel everyday to live up to the standards of our culture and our friends. But like St. Paul, let us never set aside the grace of God in order to be cultural Christians. In today’s passage, Paul teaches the Galatians the difference between faith and the law. American young people don’t know much about either one. Let’s listen carefully to St. Paul, so that we may have confidence in whom we have believed, and be set free from the curse of the law.

First, faith in Christ crucified (1-5). Look at verse 1. “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Christ Jesus was clearly portrayed as crucified.” To Paul, the Galatians’ flirtation with moralism and the law was foolishness itself, and the result of the devil’s deception. To this extent, Paul considered trust in legalistic practices and moral regulations destructive and in error. Why? Look again at verse 1b. “Before your very eyes Christ Jesus was clearly portrayed as crucified.” The gospel message is simple and vivid. The Son of God came to this world to die as the Lamb of God for the sin of the world. He was crucified, and shed his blood from the cross, though he had not sinned. It was the most tearful and shocking sacrifice that had ever been and ever will be made – the Son of God mocked, tortured and crucified to save sinful man. Jesus bore the full brunt of the condemnation that the sins of mankind deserved. It was terrible to watch. But it was God’s will for the salvation of the world. And after his crucifixion, God raised his Son Jesus from the grave on the third day, proving that he was the Son of God, and exalting him as King of kings and Lord of lords forever in the kingdom of God. Paul, as an apostle of Christ Jesus, had come to the Galatians as a witness of Christ’s death and resurrection (Acts 1:8). He portrayed it to them vividly, so that there would be no doubt that the Son of God had come and was crucified like a criminal for them. What happened when the Galatians heard the gospel? They believed what they heard, and immediately the Spirit of God came to their hearts, and began to work in them, changing them from wretched sinners under the power of sin and death, and making them into the holy children of God. They believed what they heard, and miracles happened. The sick and lame among them were healed (Ac. 14:8-10). The demon-possessed were set free and became normal human beings. Most of all, they believed, and the love of God filled their hearts, giving them an assurance of eternal life in the kingdom of God, together with their Savior, Christ Jesus. Into
this faith they were baptized and clothed in Christ. In this faith they were growing and bearing spiritual fruit, such as love, joy and peace (5:22). They were so happy when they just heard and believed. Paul later says that in their joy they would have torn out their eyes and given them to Paul in his sickness, if they could have (4:15).

But false teachers came along, and tricked the Galatians’ consciences. They said to them, “You have been saved through faith in Christ? Amen, brother. Now, you can be really spiritual! All you have to do is obey these laws, these ancient, holy laws given through Moses. That’s why Christ saved you, don’t you see?” It seemed reasonable that since Christ was a Jew, he had saved Gentiles so that they could become Jews, too. As Jews, theirs would be the promises of God given to Abraham and the patriarchs. Theirs would be the inheritance of the kingdom of Israel. Their goal was noble and right. But they were wrong to assume that they could obtain that goal through their own efforts to obey the law. Look at verses 2 and 3. “I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” In these verses, Paul reveals the bankruptcy of the idea – ‘Saved by faith - sanctified by the law.’ When the Galatians believed the gospel, they received the Holy Spirit in their hearts. The Spirit rebuked them for their sins. The Spirit led them to repentance and to deeper faith in Christ and love for God. The Spirit encouraged them in the midst of persecutions to hold on to the promise of God and the kingdom of God. In short, when the Galatians believed, they invited the Spirit to come in and make them a new creation in Christ Jesus. The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of those who believe, from first to last (Ro. 1:16,17). Nowhere and at no time is the gospel about what men can do for themselves or for God. Sanctification is the work of the Spirit, given by faith in Christ Jesus. What the Spirit began in the Galatians’ hearts, only the Spirit could complete. But when the Galatians foolishly listened to the false teachers, they showed the Spirit the door of their hearts, and began trying to accomplish the Spirit’s work by their human efforts.

Like all human beings, my son Joseph does not like to be corrected. When he plays violin or does his math homework, he only wants to be told how wonderful he is, never that he is in need of improvement here or there. In short, he wants to live up to his own standard, only, thank you very much. Like my 6 year old son, all people want to be left alone to live up to their own standard. They justify themselves, saying, “Now that I am saved, I will devote myself to good work, I won’t think lustfully or angrily anymore, and then God will accept me as a good person.” But their hope in themselves is not justified. They will shipwreck themselves, and, figuratively speaking, crucify Christ all over again (Heb 6:6). Paul asks the Galatians again, “Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?” (5) Sinners must submit to the control of the Spirit by faith in Christ Jesus, and remain under his control by faith in Christ Jesus. That is our only hope to be new creations, acceptable to God. May God help you not to show the Spirit the door through your self-righteousness, but continue to submit to him in order that he might finish the work he has begun.

Second, redeemed by faith (6-14). Even as Gentiles, many of the Galatian believers were probably drawn to the Jewish faith because of the Jews’ high moral standards and their clear teaching that God is One. So Paul introduces the father of the Jews, Abraham, to illustrate his point on the necessity of faith. Look at verses 6-7. “Consider Abraham: ‘He believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.” Abraham’s children are those who believe like Abraham in the promise of God. What was God’s promise to him?
Look at verses 8-9. “The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced
the gospel in advance to Abraham, “All nations on earth will be blessed through you.” So those who
have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” In contrast to the blessing that came to
Abraham and his children by faith, there is the curse of the law. Look at verse 10. “All who rely on
observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do
everything written in the Book of the Law.’” Moses wrote that unless we obey the law fully and at all
times, we will be cursed. So, we should do our best to live by the law, right? But those who try to live
by the law cannot escape the curse, for according to the law, there is no “try,” there is only “do.”
Leviticus 18:5 says, “the man who does these things will live by them.” What is more, God makes it
clear that the righteous are those that live by faith (Hab. 2:4). To seek righteousness and justification
before God by observing the law is to reject faith, which is the only way to please God. What is more,
to observe the law is impossible for sinful man. It is therefore a curse to man.

We are not Jews, and we are not familiar with the absolute strictness with which they strive to
live according to their law. But we can understand the curse of the law by considering our own
struggles to live up to the expectations of those around us. I want to tell you a story about a man who
was born to immigrant parents early in this century. At his birth, the doctor told the mother that the boy
was a very special one because he was so healthy and strong. The mother, who was quite superstitious,
ever forgot what the doctor said, and always treated this boy specially, and told him again and again
about his “great expectations.” The boy was indeed smart, handsome and strong, and he grew in favor
in the eyes of men. He seemed to have no limitations. But one day, he realized that others were smarter
and more able than him. Then, he despaired, thinking that he could never be the special one he was
meant to be. He tried to find happiness in living a good life and being a good father. But his sense of
curse at having failed to achieve his life’s purpose never left him. One day, after he retired, he took a
shotgun and killed himself in his garden. We can try to reconcile ourselves with having failed to meet
human expectations, but the curse of having failed to meet God’s expectation is irreconcilable. There
is no escape. There is no psychology that can make it go away. The law was given to discipline and
prepare a people belonging to God. But the law became a trap for sinners from which there is no
escape.

What hope, then, is there for sinful mankind? Look at verse 13. “Christ redeemed us from the
curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a
tree.’” In his great wisdom and mercy, God prepared a way for mankind to meet the requirements of
the law. Christ Jesus came to this world and lived a holy life in service to even the most wretched
people. He was without sin. But in obedience to God’s world salvation plan, Christ Jesus allowed
himself to be arrested, mocked, tried, tortured and finally crucified on the cross. Paul saw that Jesus,
the one and only Son of God, had allowed himself to be cursed by God. We cannot face the law. We
cannot face God’s righteousness which condemns our consciences unmercifully, in absolute adherence
to the truth. But Christ Jesus faced up to the condemnation of the law. He made himself the object of
the law’s curse and accepted the law’s wrath that belonged to Paul, and to Peter, and to each of us. We
know that Christ was crucified. But we don’t want to come too close to his cross, which reveals the
terrible price that he paid as a ransom for our sins. But we must come to his cross, and see the curse
of God that was spoken to us, but borne by him. We must see his shame and pain and know that it was
by his wounds that we receive the Spirit and are healed. Christ paid the price to free us from the curse
of the law. Look at verse 14. “He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come
to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.” Praise
God who redeemed us from the curse of the law through the cross of Christ, so that the promise of the
Spirit might be ours by faith.

Third, prisoners of the law. What good then, is the law, if it serves only to curse mankind, whom God made? Paul makes clear that the covenant between God and Abraham was by faith. The law, introduced 430 years later, could not invalidate what was Abraham’s and ours by faith in the promise. Look at verse 19a. “What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.” The law came later. The law was introduced through a mediator, Moses. The law came not to supplant the promise, but to drive proud and self-righteous sinners to faith in the promise. Look at verse 22. “But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.” The law came to condemn the world, so that forgiveness and life could come to those who believe and live by the Spirit. In this way, the law was like a prison. The law was even more like a schoolmaster. Before the days of “self-esteem”, the school master was given absolute authority to discipline and correct the children under his care, until they were ready to receive their rights and inheritance as adults. No one liked the school master. But his job was essential for the future well-being of the children. The law is like that school master. The law restricts our civic disobedience. Even more so, the law exposes our spiritual disobedience, frightening our conscience and our soul. What we don’t want to see, the law reveals, so that we might not remain in our delusion and self-confidence, but come humbly to Christ and believe in what he has done for us and submit to the Spirit, that he might reign in us for our justification and sanctification as the children of God. Only when we believe do we come out from under the law’s supervision and the pain of our guilty consciences to live as the free children of God.

Fourth, sons of God by faith. What is our inheritance when we become the children of God by faith? When we are baptized into Christ, we are clothed with Christ. We know the reality is that when we believe, the Spirit of God is working in us, but that work is not done! But we can have peace, because at the moment we believe, we are clothed in Christ. God who sees everything, chooses to see only what we will be when the sanctifying work of the Spirit is done. He sees Christ being formed in everyone who believes, and he is pleased. When we believe in Christ, we are made one with all who believe. Jews and Gentiles often hate each other. Men and women too easily get into boxing matches. Workers hate their greedy masters, and owners mistrust lazy workers. But in Christ, all are one. All are sinners, who fell short of the glory of God, but are freely justified by faith in Christ Jesus. In short, we can love one another for who we are, because Christ loves each of us beyond measure. Finally, as children of God, we receive the promised inheritance that belongs to Abraham. We receive the forgiveness of sins, eternal life and the kingdom of God. There is nothing to gain by depending on observance of the law and the traditions of men. But there is freedom from the curse and the inheritance of the kingdom of God for those who believe in Christ Jesus crucified to redeem us from sin. Let’s read verse 29 together. “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

In this passage, we learned that the righteous will live by faith, from first to last. The gospel does not depend on man’s power to obey. The gospel depends on the faithfulness and love of God to keep his promise by sending his Holy Spirit to everyone who believes. Gospel faith is trusting in the cross of Christ more than in ourselves. May God bless you to escape the curse of the law by trusting in the cross of Christ.