

## GALATIANS 3: 1-25

What is the basis of a Christian's identity? Paul is concerned that the identity he sought to establish among the Galatians is being subverted by the circumcision faction. Two questions arise in chapter 3. What is the real basis of Christian identity and what are its fruits in life?

### 1) 3: 1-5

The death of Jesus would have been within the lifetime of some of the Galatians and many of those who would have witnessed it, would have described it to those who had not. For Paul, establishing faithfulness to God on the basis of living a religious Jewish lifestyle of law-keeping, undermined the central and all-sufficient basis of faithfulness in God's actions through Christ's dying and rising. It's not about doing certain things and living a certain way, but in trusting and believing in what God has accomplished in the death and resurrection of Christ. The law's role (to be discussed below) is not to make right (justify) but to support a living out of faith under the Spirit's inspiring motivation.

The Galatians lived in a culture (not unlike our own) where people measured their identity and worth according to what they did and the associations they held - i.e. race, colour, creed, lifestyle, money, status, organizational affiliation, religion, gender, etc. Thus, those who told them they had to do certain things and live a certain way in order to be acceptable and worthy of the gift of God's grace in Christ, made sense. According to Paul, however, the place to begin and stand as a Christian was to trust and accept that God had loved them and made them right by forgiving their sin (Christ being made sin and a curse on their behalf). The law was not to be discarded, but its place in the Christian's life was not as justifier, but as supporter to Christian living.

By trusting and accepting God's forgiving grace in the death of Christ, the believer also received a share of the resurrecting power of Christ in the gift of the Holy Spirit (a foretaste of the assurance, fullness, peace, and joy of the age to come). Paul's frustration with the Galatians is that they have begun with faith and the Spirit but are now being influenced by those who want to make law-keeping the basis of Christian faithfulness, not the Spirit's inner conviction and inspiration (most clearly reflected in love).

### 2) vs. 6-14

The basis of being made right with God from the very beginning (in Abraham which is earlier than Moses and the gift of the law) was faith. It was God who would act (making Abraham the father of the people of Israel and through Israel, the father of many nations) and Abraham who was challenged to trust that God would fulfil what God had promised (the birth of Isaac was

the result). The law, which was given many years later, was not intended to nullify the priority of faith in God's saving actions on behalf of the people. Rather, the law's role was to help people live their lives as faithfully as they could, being a guide to them, and a mirror of their imperfection and unworthiness outside of God's constant grace and forgiveness.

The theological idea in Christ's death is that Jesus fulfilled the law in his life, and by his death bore the curse that every human being bears, namely, the fact that we are vulnerable sinners. Living according to the law doesn't eliminate our sinfulness, but only limits its sway (by pointing to the error of our ways) and reveals to us that we are in trouble unless there is a love greater than our sin to embrace us and make us whole. By bearing our curse, Christ took upon himself our humanity in all its imperfection and failure and communicated to us God's loving forgiveness. Thus, Christ did what the law was never able to do nor intended to do. The Circumcision faction wants to give the law the kind of place in life it can never have - i.e. that of defining a Christian's faithfulness and identity.

It is faith in Christ not law-keeping and its accompanying lifestyle, which marks a Christian's identity. And it is only through faith that the Spirit is also bestowed and made alive in the Christian's heart, issuing in works of love that come from the heart rather than out of duty or compulsion. The Galatians are confused about this.

### 3) 19-29

Paul wants to emphasize again that the law, far from being in competition with faith as to how a Christian should understand his/her identity, is intended to remind us, and show us (as in a mirror) the inadequacy of our own attempts to be religious, faithful, moral, and righteous. Indeed, law-keeping (as much as other forms of spirituality) can become a source of divisiveness in the church, as some see themselves as superior to others. Paul's experience of Christ and the Spirit through faith is one where trust in God leads to an energy to love that builds bridges and community in unity rather than competitive divisiveness and individualist superiority. He believes the circumcision faction are promoting the latter type of spirituality (a Jewish temptation) whereas elsewhere (e.g. in Corinth), he saw others promoting a divisive spirituality based on gifts of the Spirit whereby some were 'superior' to others (a gentile temptation).

In Christ, believers are freed from having to be righteous (according to law-keeping rules), trusting that by holding on to Christ's righteousness on their behalf, the Spirit's love-energy can work in their hearts slowly weeding out the corrupting working of sin, opening them to the beauty of others in spite of their flaws. Therefore, the distinguishing mark of the Christian is believing in Christ and being one in Christ's Spirit. And this distinguishing mark also makes relative other bases for believers distinguishing themselves from one another as better or worse - things like gender, social status, and racial roots.