

20260315 Defending Justification By Faith Alone

Galatians 3:1-14

In his first sermon, Pastor Bijoy reminded us that the central message of Galatians is the purity of the gospel: we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ, not by works of the law. Justification means that God declares a person to be in right standing with Him, that the person is saved and in the right relationship with God. Today, we continue with Galatians 3:1–14. The title of today’s message is “Defending Justification by Faith Alone.”

In Paul’s time, some false teachers came to the churches in Galatia. They said faith in Jesus was good—but not enough, and that Gentile believers still needed to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. They said that only the Jewish people were the people of God, and the Gentile Christians had to become Jewish before receiving the salvation blessings. Their teaching was “believing Jesus” plus “the works of the law”.

Seeing the danger of this teaching, Paul urgently warned the Galatian believers about this “another gospel,” which is really no gospel at all. He made it clear that justification is by faith alone; nothing can be added to it. You might wonder, “I believe in Jesus Christ. What do you mean that nothing can be added? Nobody asks me to observe the Jewish law. Why are we studying all these?”

Well, it’s true that we don’t face the issue of Jewish law today. But have you heard people say that we are saved by faith, yet to please God we must do what the Bible teaches? In other words, it becomes “believing in Jesus” plus “doing the Bible’s teaching.” It may sound reasonable, but Paul strongly insists that we cannot earn salvation or please God by our own merit. Justification is by faith alone. To prove this, he appeals to the Galatians’ own experience (3:1-5) and to the evidence of Scripture (3:6-4:11). I will cover 3:1-14 today.

I. The Experiences in the Spirit (v1-5)

Paul first reminds the Galatian believers of their experience of the Holy Spirit, because the Spirit’s indwelling is the mark of justification in Jesus Christ. He speaks in a very strong voice to wake them up to the seriousness of this issue.

¹You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes, Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.

“Bewitched” is like someone waving a magic wand, causing the Galatian believers to lose their senses and simply follow along. It suggests that the false teachers’ arguments sounded persuasive. And the same thing can happen to us. We just mentioned the saying: “Christians are saved by believing, but we please God, and we grow by doing the Bible’s teaching.” Paul says, “Wake up, it’s so dangerous.” Then he asks,

²I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard?³Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?⁴Have you experienced so much in vain—if it really was in vain?⁵So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?

Paul reminds the Galatian believers of their experiences of the Spirit at conversion and in everyday life. He contrasts “by believing the Gospel” and “by the works of the law” or “by the means of the flesh”.

The indwelling of the Spirit marks the coming of the end-time salvation. This was prophesied in the Old Testament again and again, like Jeremiah 31 and Joel 2:18. Ezekiel 36:26–27 also says,

²⁶I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

The Spirit indwelt the Gentile believers in Galatia when they first believed, because they heard the gospel with faith—not because of works of the law. The “law” here refers especially to the Mosaic law, including circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath observance. After God saved the Israelites out of Egypt, He gave them the law so they would know His holiness and understand what is right in His sight. God saved them first and then gave them the law. But by the time of Jesus and Paul, many Jewish people had begun to treat the law as a merit-based standard for gaining salvation and pleasing God. And we still hear a similar voice today: “To be saved and to please God, you must obey God.” Obedience itself is not the problem. The problem is relying on obedience as a merit-based standard for salvation.

People today experience the Spirit’s indwelling in different ways when they come to believe the gospel by faith. We have heard testimonies of some who felt warmth and deep love from God, some who wept with thankfulness, and others who sensed the powerful presence of the Spirit. But if we look back on our own experience, it all began the same way—by faith.

Paul goes on to say that we must finish by means of the Spirit, not the flesh, because you have experienced the work of the Spirit so much in your lives. “To finish” means to persevere to the end. In Galatians 3:3, “flesh” figuratively refers to merit-based effort—something that comes from ourselves rather than from God. To live “by means of the flesh” means relying on our own performance, which stands in contrast to “by means of the Spirit.” We live in a merit-based culture. In school, you are considered a good student if you get good scores and meet certain standards. At work, you are evaluated by your performance. So, without realizing it, some of us begin to think, “I am a good Christian because I read the Bible every day, or because I attend a life group.” Merit or good work is good, but relying on our merit or good works to walk the journey of salvation is bad in God’s sight, and it is not sustainable. The good works on our own are like filthy rags to God (Isaiah 64:6).

Twenty years ago, my pastor in China gave us a transparent watch sticker that read “PRAY,” so we would remember to pray at work when checking the time. I tried, and it worked... but only for about a month. After that, when I looked at the watch, the red-colored word became transparent to my eyes. I forgot to pray often again.

The good works pleasing to God come from the new life born in the Spirit. They are a response to God’s grace and love. When we unconsciously fall into the trap of the flesh, God’s Spirit reminds us of Jesus and of God’s love. When I was working in China, I used to read the Bible and pray every morning before leaving for work. One morning, I had just finished my “routine” and was about to rush out the door when I felt the Spirit drawing me back. I sat down again and prayed, “Lord, what is it?” God replied to my heart, “I just want you to know that I love you. Now you can go.” I was deeply touched and replied, “I love you too.” That is the motivation for our good works.

Verse 5 is the question that draws out Paul’s point, “*So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?*” Paul is saying that we are justified by faith, not by the works of the law or means of the flesh.

Let me just sum up what we have been talking about. Paul defended “justification by faith alone” by

appealing to the believers' experience in the Spirit. The Spirit is the mark of justification that we are saved by Jesus.

II. Evidence from the Scripture – the Abrahamic covenant.

The false teachers claimed that only Jewish people were God's chosen people, the people in God's salvation blessings. They argued that Gentile Christians must be circumcised and follow the Mosaic Law to become Jewish and thus become members of the people of God. Paul responded by referencing the Jewish people's father, Abraham, and God's overarching salvation plan. Paul emphasizes that becoming God's people is also by faith alone, not by converting to Judaism. This is the main point of the argument in the passage from 3:6-4:11.

Paul first refers to the Abrahamic covenant, which reveals God's overarching plan of salvation. From the beginning, it was part of that plan that the Gentiles would be justified by faith alone.

Abraham is a man of faith. He obeyed God's calling and moved to a rural foreign land. God made a promise to him, known as the Abrahamic covenant.

"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Gen 12:2-3)

The promised blessing included descendants and land, which foreshadowed the salvation blessing in Jesus Christ.

God promised Abraham—who was called Abram at the time—that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Yet Abram was already very old, and his wife Sarai was barren. In a situation that seemed impossible, he chose to trust God's promise. Scripture says, "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6). The Lord later reaffirmed the promise that He would be the God for him and his descendants. That is why the Israelites, the Jewish people, are called the people of God—those who belong to God and share in His covenant blessings.

With the background, we now look at how Paul uses the Abrahamic covenant to defend justification by faith alone. Paul says,

⁶So also Abraham "believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."⁷Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham.

Paul is saying that by faith in Jesus, the Gentile Christians are children of Abraham already, so there is no need to become Jewish. This is the central point of the argument. Paul continues to explain why,

⁸Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you."⁹So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

Referring to Gen 12:2-3, Paul says that it is in God's plan in the first place that the Gentiles are justified by faith. Then Paul further argues that justification by the works of the law is impossible.

¹⁰For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."¹¹Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because "the righteous will live by faith."

In Scripture, the requirement for "justification by the law" is this: one must keep the whole law flawlessly. For those who fail to do so, the law pronounces a curse. Since no one can do that, the ones "by the law" are all under its curse. On the other hand, the Scripture says, "the righteous will live by faith." The "righteous" are those who trust God's words and plans. They are not under the curse of death but receive eternal life through

faith. Why, then, are those “by faith” not under the curse, even though they do not keep the law? Because,

¹³Christ 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 pole.”¹⁴He 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.

Those of faith are not under the curse of the law, but in the blessings of salvation. All because of Jesus' death on the cross.

Paul's point is that all who have faith are the “children of Abraham”, who are also called “the people of God”. Paul's line of argument is this: 1) God had already established His plan that the Gentiles would be justified by faith; 2) The law cannot bring life; instead, it brings a curse; and 3) Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law so that we may become God's people.

Today, as Christians, we are children of Abraham – the people of God, by faith in Jesus, not by the works of the law of any kind.

Abraham's faith means trusting in what God promises, even if it does not look possible. By faith like that, we are children of Abraham. I will use the Beijing pastor's story again. For here, I refer to him as Pastor Sheng. He received a calling from God to relocate the church to the high-tech and university zone and to rent a large space for it. He said, “God makes it clear that we need to bring the Gospel to the people there.” But the rent was super expensive in the region. It was more than twice the members' offerings. But Pastor Sheng said, “God wants us to do it, and He will provide.” I was so scared, because we needed to pay rent every month. And we moved. God did miraculous works in the region. And God provided exactly the amount the church needed for the year. That was a sign of God's care for His people. Among us, we have many other testimonies showing that by faith, we are the people of God.

III. Summary

Now let's summarize today's message. As we mentioned at the beginning, the Gospel is “justification by faith alone”, and that cannot be compromised by “plus something else”.

Paul's argument for truth first appeals to believers' experience of the Holy Spirit. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit means that God's final salvation has already come to us; that we are justified and accepted by God. We can be strengthened in the truth by remembering our experience in the Spirit.

Paul also referred to the Abrahamic covenant to show us that the Gentile Christians are children of Abraham, the people of God, by faith alone, not by becoming Jews through circumcision and Mosaic law. Justification by the works of the law is a dead-end road. We imitate Abraham's faith. And by that faith, we experience the blessings of God.

May God bless us by helping us stand firm on the truth of salvation – justification by faith alone in Jesus Christ!