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RADICAL: rebuke Galatians 3:1-8

Last week I asked you all a really important question. If someone were to ask you, "How do you know you are a Christian," what would your answer be? In one sentence? Truly, I want you to formulate your answer right now in your head. "I am a Christian because...." What fills in your blank? Just take a moment and answer that question for yourself.

Do you know what the most common answer in America would be? "How do you know you are a Christian?" Here it is: "I try to be a good person." So what is the sound you hear when that answer is offered? Is it, "Ding, ding, ding!" Winner! Or is it "Buzz...zzz!" [*buzzer sound*] Wrong answer!? "I try to be a good person. I keep the commandments. I go to church. I take care of my elderly parents." These are all answers I have heard to the question, "How do you know you are a Christian"...and they are all wrong, wrong, wrong!

Chapel Hill, you have got to hear this. You have got to understand this. Because at the bottom of this question is the heart of the gospel. We Americans, especially, like to imagine that being a Christian means being a good person—or at least, being better than that loser over there because God grades on a curve, right? But the Bible's answer is clear: we can never, ever, ever be good enough to satisfy God's requirements for good behavior. Why? Because God's pass/fail standard for righteousness is perfection. That means, even if you live absolutely perfectly from this day forward for the rest of your life, it's still too late! Because you haven't lived perfectly up till now.

In last week's passage, Paul summed up this rule-keeping mentality with one word. What? Law! The Law means obeying the Ten Commandments and keeping all of the other 613 Jewish rules. "The Law" was Paul's shorthand for "Keeping all the Rules." If we keep all the rules, then we please God. If we keep all the rules, that's what it means to be a Christian. If we keep all the rules, we get to go to heaven. But that's the Law talking. And every time we define our Christian faith by saying, "I try to be a good person"... we are living under the Law and it is a cruel tyrant, because it always promises and never delivers. Promises freedom... delivers bondage.

So, if the Law is such a tyrant, how do we escape its bondage? Paul says that we must die to the law and we do that through Jesus. Jesus is the only one who kept

the Law perfectly. When he was crucified and raised, he broke the hold of the Law on his people. Remember little Maddie hiding inside this big terry cloth robe last week? When we run to Christ and allow him to hide us inside his robe of righteousness, when God looks at us, he sees his perfect, spotless Son. And, for Jesus' sake, God pronounces us spotless and holy. The Bible calls that "justification." Our salvation is entirely dependent upon God's gracious gift of his Son who took our place and who hides us in his own righteousness. The answer to the question, "What does it mean to be a Christian" is simply this: "I am trusting Jesus to save me and following him wherever he leads me."

I realize I have spent a lot of time recapping...but this is the heart of Galatians. If we don't understand this, we don't understand the gospel and the rest of this letter does not make any sense and doesn't matter! So let's pick up where we left off... Galatians 3: 1-5. And just in case you thought Paul had gotten all of his irritation out of his system... wrong!

Imagine your life as a timeline. *[unroll paper]* You are born here, you die here... and your life is in between. Now, before we are even born, God already knows us, loves us and has taken steps to save us. But somewhere in here you realize you cannot keep the rules well enough to please God. So you surrender your life to Jesus, and allow him to surround you with his righteousness and the Father looks at us, sees his spotless Son, and declares, "Forgiven!" One more time: What is that moment called? Justification. It happens at a point in time! Punctiliar... if you want the theological word! Boom! God declares you righteous for the sake of his Son.

But are you righteous? From that point forward, are you sinless? Are all Christians perfect? No. So what happens? Does Jesus just leave you the way you are? Does he just cover up your sins and leave you in them from that day forward? No! There is another work that occurs after Justification. What is it called? Sanctification! Another fancy church word. Sanctification means "being made holy." If justification happens here *[on paper]* —punctiliar, at one point in your life—where does sanctification happen? It happens for the rest of your life! It is linear. For the rest of your life, after you are justified, you become more and more like Jesus... more and more holy. Sanctified.

But here's the question that Paul is now asking: how do you get sanctified? After Jesus saves us, is it then that you start obeying the rules? Do you become a rule-keeper after you have been justified in Christ? What does Paul say to that idea? "You idiots!" He is scathing! That's what he says when he calls the Galatians "foolish!" And he does it twice! He also says, "You must be bewitched. Someone cast an evil spell on you." Why? What is so idiotic? It is this: the idea that rule-keeping will work any better after they have been saved by Jesus than before they were saved by Jesus.

Well then, if we don't become "better Christians" by trying harder after we are saved, how do we get sanctified? The same way we got justified! It is the work of Christ. How? We are not only surrounded by his righteousness, we are invaded by his Spirit. When we surrender to Jesus—admitting that rule-keeping hasn't worked—and ask him to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, he not only covers us with his righteousness, he comes to live inside us as the Holy Spirit. This is the Spirit of Jesus: the same Spirit at work in Genesis, creating everything; the same Spirit that descended upon Jesus at his baptism; the same Spirit that descended upon everyone on the Day of Pentecost; the same Spirit by which the apostles were able to perform great miracles. As if it were not enough that Jesus takes our place on the cross and saves us, now—incredibly—we discover he comes to live inside us! In other words, Jesus finishes what he starts. He saves us and he sanctifies us, because our rule-keeping good works are no more effective at making us holy than they were at saving us in the first place.

That's what Paul means when he says, ² "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... ⁵Does God give you his spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?" This is the first time that the Holy Spirit is mentioned in Galatians. But Paul will mention him 16 times from here to the end of the letter as he tries to explain how God works to make us more and more like the savior.

So if Jesus does the work of justifying us by his death and resurrection—and if the Holy Spirit does the work of sanctifying us by invading us and transforming us from the inside out—then what do we do? What is our part in the process of our salvation and sanctification? Are we entirely passive? Is there anything the Lord requires of us in this process?

Paul says there is one thing that God allows us to do to participate in his work of salvation and sanctification. One thing. What is it? Faith! We have one verb in our spiritual journey... only one: Believe! Believe in God. Believe in what Jesus and his Spirit are doing in your life. Trust God wholly, and he will do the work that you cannot do. And then, Paul offers an example of that kind of saving faith... an example that should make every single Jew sit up and take notice. *[Read verses 6-14]*

Let me remind you, once again, to whom Paul is writing. The Galatians have been invaded by a group of hyper-Jewish Christians who claim that believing in Jesus is not enough; that in order to be a Christian, you must first be a Jew. In other words, you cannot possibly have a right relationship with God unless you keep all the Jewish rules.

Have you ever heard of Aikido? It is a martial art like karate that specializes in turning someone's own strength against them. Well, this is one of the greatest

examples of spiritual Aikido in the New Testament. The false teachers in Galatia claim you can't be a Christian simply by believing... that you have to obey all the Jewish rules, too. And who does Paul lift up to dispute their claim? Abraham, the Father of the Jewish nation. ⁶ "Consider Abraham: 'He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'" Abraham, the Father of all Jews, was considered righteous by God. Why? Because he "believed God!" He had faith that God could do what he could not do. And do you know where that quote comes from? Way back in Genesis 15, where God makes a covenant with Abraham and his offspring that he will be their God and they will be his people and that through them, God will bless the world.

But there's more. Did God make a covenant with Abraham because he was keeping the Ten Commandments? No! There were no Ten Commandments until Moses, hundreds of years later. Did God make a covenant with Abraham because he kept all of the religious rules? No! There were no rules yet, either. Okay—careful here—did God make a covenant with Abraham because he had been circumcised? No! Abraham doesn't get snipped for four more chapters!!!!

Do you see what a bombshell this is? The false teachers claim that belief is not enough; that you have to obey the rules you have to be a law-abiding, circumcised Jew in order for Jesus to save you. Believing in Jesus is not enough! And Paul says, "Really? That's funny, because I could have sworn that your scriptures tell us that Abraham—your father—was credited with righteousness because of his faith in God before he was circumcised... before there was any Law to obey! If you claim you cannot be righteous before God without being circumcised, how then do you explain that Abraham, the Father of our Nation, was pronounced righteous by God before he was circumcised... simply because he believed in God!"

Do you see how radical this is? Paul is saying, "It is not by your effort that you are saved, nor is it by your effort that you are sanctified. It is God who does the work—God the son who was crucified on your behalf and in whose righteousness you are hidden—God the Spirit who enters your life and begins to change you from the inside out. Nothing we do can save us. Nothing we do can change us if God is not already doing the work. All we can do is have faith in God.

But this is important: biblical faith is not simply intellectual agreement. In America, we think of "belief" as something that we do in our heads. We "believe" something to be true. That is not what the Bible means when it speaks of faith. Remember what faith looked like for Abraham? What did it mean for him to believe in God? It meant that when God called him, he left his country and family behind and followed God to a promised land he did know!

Biblical faith always acts! Jesus said that those who hear him but do not put his words into practice are like the man who built his house upon the sand. James said that that we are not to be just hearers of the word, but doers of it. Faith in

the Bible always has feet on it. Belief in the Bible is not just head... it is hands and feet, just like our Mexico theme. To believe in Jesus—to have faith in Jesus—is simply to follow him and trust that whatever he tells us to do, his Spirit will give us the power to do it.

You have heard from some of our high school students about their experience in Mexico. I want you to hear from one more. Bridget Fouquette. Bridget's dad, Darren, was hit and killed by a car last year while riding his bike to work. Bridget's story is powerful.

Hi my name is Bridget Fouquette, and this was my third trip to Mexico. And after my second trip, my dad was bringing me home from the airport and we were talking about all the great things that God was doing and just how he had moved me in this trip. And my dad said, "I want to come with you next year. I think this would be a really great bonding experience for us and this is something I think we could really do together and enjoy a lot." I got really excited to do this with my dad. And last June, like Pastor Mark said, my dad was hit by a car and killed. Just kind of then and there I said, "Mexico might not be worth it without my dad. I don't think I can go without him after I saw his excitement." So I kind of just said maybe Mexico is not for me anymore. And I kind of kept praying about it and God said, "No, this is for you. You need to go back. You need to keep working and have a hand in this." And so I said, "Okay I will, but I still want that Father/Daughter experience." So I kept praying to God and asked for a team leader and team that would be able to support me and give me that Father/Daughter experience. And He did. He gave me Dave Haugen who is just an amazing leader. And I felt so blessed because I got that Father/Daughter experience through him. God showed himself every day throughout that trip through Dave. Thank you so much, Dave!

Bridget's story is a story of real faith... of believing in God. Not in the American, "I believe it in my head" sort of way, but in the way of Abraham... and the way of Jesus. She didn't want to go to Mexico, but she believed God wanted her to go. Her faith caused her to obey obey Him. She followed him and trusted that He would give her the power to do what she could not do in her own strength. And He did.

One of my challenges writing this sermon is this: It sounds contradictory, because every Sunday, I send you out with something to do... with a spiritual assignment. But if we don't understand today's message, all of that effort will be just another version of good works. We cannot be saved by our good efforts; only Christ can justify. We cannot become more like Jesus by our good efforts; only the Spirit of Christ can sanctify. What we can do is have faith in Christ; we can believe in him, which means we follow him and trust him and watch with amazement as His Spirit does what we cannot do—transforms us bit by bit into the likeness of the Lord Jesus.

The verb of our Christian life is simply this: Believe! Believe in God! Believe in Jesus... with heart and hands and feet faith. Every other verb of good intentions—"I try," "I do," "I behave," "I attend," "I give," "I serve," even "I love"—all these verbs flow from what God has already done for us. They are products of his grace, not requirements for it. If we truly believe—if we have real faith in the grace of God—all the rest will follow.

So beloved, do you really believe in Jesus? Bridget trusted Jesus to save her, and followed him where he led her. That what Jesus asks of every one of us!

Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **DIG DEEPER**

1. What evidence do you have of Paul's supreme irritation with the Galatians? Why is he so upset?
2. How does Paul make the case that the cross of Jesus was not Plan B because God's first plan for salvation didn't work? What role did faith have in the Old Testament scheme? What evidence do we have of God's grace towards sinners even in the earliest chapters of Galatians.
3. Have you ever felt like you were living out Plan B in your own life? What does this passage teach you about God's sovereignty over all parts of your life?