Studies on the Holy Spirit, Lesson 5

CHRISTIANS LIVE BY FAITH, DEPENDING ON THE HOLY SPIRIT

Galatians 3:1–14

Key Verse: 3:2

“I 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?”

This Summer we’ve been learning about who the Holy Spirit is and what he does for us. The Holy Spirit is one of the three Persons of the Trinity. Even though we may not know him very well, he’s very much involved in our Christian lives. He gives us new birth. He satisfies our souls. He's our Encourager. He's the Spirit of truth, who guides us into all truth. But in today’s passage Paul addresses a disturbing tendency among Christians. As we live the Christian life, over time we start thinking we need to keep religious rules by our own effort. It may seem like going forward, but actually it’s a huge step backwards. When we depend on keeping rules and laws, the Holy Spirit can't work in us. Through studying this passage we want to learn: first, how we receive the Spirit; second, what it means to “rely on faith”; third, the new identity and view of others the Spirit gives us; and fourth, how Christ set us free from relying on the works of the law. May God speak to each of us personally through his living word today.

**First**, how we receive the Spirit (1–5). Look at verses 1–5. Paul who loved the Galatians starts this section with some very strong language. He calls them foolish. He says they’ve been “bewitched.” He says they started off well, but were trying to finish in the wrong way. He even warns that they may have experienced many things in vain. What’s he talking about? Mainly it’s circumcision. The Galatians were Gentiles, and very recently they’d converted to Christianity when Paul came and shared the good news about Jesus. But as soon as Paul left, some Jews from the circumcision group came and told them they needed to be circumcised. Many were being persuaded. Why was Paul so urgent to put a stop to this? He explains in 5:2–4: “Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.” Strong words! Those insisting on circumcision were teaching a righteousness that comes through keeping the law. It was circumcision now, but soon they’d be teaching many other Old Testament laws as well. For Paul, agreeing to circumcision was compromising the core of the Christian faith. He says in 2:21, “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”

Most of us today aren’t confronted with the issue of circumcision. But we do face various forms of legalism being taught in the name of Christianity. It’s tricky because legalistic practices usually start off as good things. Originally God taught Abraham and his descendants to be circumcised so that they would have a clear identity as his people. At that time it was good and necessary for them. Still today, to become a Christian we all need to make a clean break with our old lives centered on ourselves and on the world. But as Christians we’re called not only to repent but also to believe in Jesus. Without believing in Jesus, even repentance becomes a form of legalism. Generally, whatever brings the focus off of *Jesus* and what *he’s* done for us, and puts the focus on *ourselves*, and what *we* have to do, becomes a form of legalism. Prayer, Bible study, going to church, teaching the Bible to others, tithing, world mission—these are all really good things that can help us grow spiritually. But if we’re doing them not to come to Jesus and believe in him but just to feel more righteous about ourselves, even *they* become forms of legalism. They become our human works, not God’s work.

To help the Galatians, Paul goes back to the core of our faith. Look at verse 1b. “Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.” Paul didn’t teach the Galatians rules and laws—he taught them about Jesus, especially that he died on a cross for our sins. It was hard to hear and difficult to understand. But wherever he went Paul talked about Christ’s crucifixion, even though some people thought it was foolish (1Co1:18,23). It was the gospel of God’s grace. It was to make it clear that we come into a right relationship with God only through the grace of Jesus who died on a cross in our places. Christianity at its core is not about what we do; it's about what Jesus did for us on the cross. This is the gospel. It’s the power of God to change all kinds of sinful people into God’s children (Ro1:16). When our thinking and teaching become full of things we must do, we can’t clearly see Jesus Christ and why he was crucified. In living the Christian life, we need to not only hear it at the beginning but also keep on thinking about what it really means that Jesus was crucified.

To help them further, Paul also mentions how we receive the Spirit. Read verses 2–5. The Galatians knew they didn’t receive the Spirit by trying to keep some laws; they received the Spirit when they believed the message about Jesus Christ crucified. When we read the book of Acts, we see this happen again and again. Wherever they were, the apostles talked about Jesus who was crucified and rose again, and whenever people believed this message, they received the Holy Spirit. They may have been strict Jews in Jerusalem, or Gentiles in some remote place. Apostle Peter shared the message about Jesus with the Roman centurion Cornelius and his family and friends, and when they believed it, the Holy Spirit came on all of them, right then and there (Ac10–11).

When we read verses 2–5 we especially notice a sharp contrast between “the works of the law” and receiving the Spirit. Through the works of the law people think they earn their righteousness with their own effort. It artificially puffs people up and makes them boastful (Ro4:2). But we receive the Spirit only by God’s grace to us in Jesus (1Co4:7). Paul told the Galatians in verse 5 that when they received the Spirit, God graciously performed miracles among them. Mostly it was the miracle of people being changed from the inside out. Christianity is never about keeping laws; it’s about receiving the Spirit by believing in Jesus. Trying to adhere to the works of the law doesn’t accomplish anything good. A few people who can keep laws outwardly become very proud; most of us feel insufficient, guilty and condemned. But receiving the Spirit by believing in Jesus who was crucified gives all of us the power of the Spirit. We actually experience God’s grace and help to live a truly changed life. We need to realize that legalism of various kinds can easily creep into any Christian fellowship. When it does, it snuffs out the Holy Spirit’s work. We need to remember Paul’s admonishment: “…the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2Co3:6b).

Often in ministry we’re confronted with all kinds of practical problems that people face—often they're financial problems or relationship problems. Sometimes we try to tackle these problems head-on and tell people, based on the Bible, “You should do this” or “You should do that.” But actually the best help we can give to people is to help them believe more deeply in Jesus who was crucified, so that they can receive the Holy Spirit who can truly help them. When we keep our message and our focus on Jesus crucified, our personal lives and ministry will be filled with the presence, grace and power of the Holy Spirit.

**Second**, what it means to “rely on faith” (6–9). Apostle Paul often used the Old Testament Scriptures to explain and support what he was saying. In this case, he uses the illustration of Abraham in Genesis. Look at verse 6. This is a quote from Genesis 15:6. Abraham was brought into a right relationship with God when he believed in him. And actually, this was before Abraham was circumcised (Ro4:9–10). Look at verse 7. Here Paul meant especially uncircumcised Gentiles. They may not have had any of the religious traditions of the legalistic Jews, but if they believed in Jesus, they were actually children of Abraham. Look at verse 8. This is another quote from Genesis. This promise of God to Abraham is recorded three times, in Genesis 12:3, 18:18 and 22:18. It’s also mentioned later in God’s promises to Isaac and Jacob (26:4; 28:14). From the beginning God had planned to include the Gentiles among his people. They would be included not through circumcision or keeping laws, but through learning faith, just as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were included among God’s people through learning personal faith.

Read verse 9. Here we really have to think about the meaning of the phrase “rely on faith.” In verses 10–12 Paul contrasts it with relying on the law and on the works of the law. At first it seems that relying on faith is much easier, and relying on the law and the works of the law is much harder. But actually, just the opposite is true. Being circumcised and keeping some outward laws is relatively easy; we keep busy doing “religious” things and just cruise along on autopilot. But relying on faith is really hard. Nothing is tangible. Nothing seems certain or secure or guaranteed. Often we have to wait a really long time. Often the reality we’re in seems quite different from our faith. Often it seems we should do something instead of just relying on faith.

We’re all living in a culture of self-reliance, which was developed through the famous 19th century author Ralph Waldo Emerson. As a youth Emerson lived through many tragedies. Just two weeks before his eighth birthday his father died from stomach cancer. Later, without a dad, he had to work to support his own education at Harvard. Two of his brothers died of tuberculosis. After college he started off as a pastor and was very busy. But then his young wife also died of tuberculosis at the age of 20. He was so troubled he began to question his faith. He resigned as a pastor, traveled around Europe meeting famous intellectuals, and returned to America as a lecturer. Among his writings is an essay called *Self-Reliance*. In it Emerson promoted the staunch individualism for which America has become well-known. From his human experiences we can understand why he resorted to relying on himself. We may relate to him on some level. But his ideas taught people a mindset very different from the core of Christianity, which is to rely on Jesus and his grace. Relying on one’s self may seem certain. Relying only on faith is really hard. Like Abraham, who was old and childless, all we have to rely on is God’s promises. It took 25 years of hard spiritual training for Abraham to fully learn this lesson. But God’s promises are actually surer than anything or anyone else, including one’s self. This is the life God calls us to, not to rely on ourselves or on our works, but to rely on faith in Jesus, holding only onto his promises. When we rely only on faith in Jesus, God may not change our situation, but he does promise to fill us with his Spirit (14b).

**Third**, the new identity and view of others the Spirit gives us (7,9,14). In these verses Paul also teaches what happens when we receive the Spirit. We become the true children of Abraham (7). We are blessed along with our father of faith, Abraham (9). We receive the blessing given to Abraham (14). But what does this really mean to us? It means that through our faith in Jesus, we become very sure of our new identity. Romans 8:16 says, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” When we have the assurance through the Holy Spirit that we are God’s children, we won’t be susceptible to trying to earn God’s favor through the works of the law. Through the Spirit we also begin to see others differently. They may have a culture very different from ours, but those who have genuine faith in Jesus we respect as God’s own dear children, and we don’t try to oppress them through making them adhere to religious legalisms.

**Fourth**, how Christ set us free from relying on the works of the law (10–14). Paul finishes this section strongly by reminding us again of what Christ did for us. God’s law is a blessing, but trying to live by the works of the law actually brings us under God’s curse. It’s because we can never really continue to do everything that God’s laws demand—we’re bound to fail in some way, sooner or later. And when we fail, even a little bit, we come under God’s curse. But Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 21:13. On the cross Christ fulfilled all God’s laws and even took the curse of God’s law away from us. He was cursed in our places, for all our failures, so that we don’t have to live under the curse of the law. When we remember this amazing grace, we won’t be fooled into thinking we need to adhere to some laws to be right with God.

So today’s passage has taught us that we need to believe and focus on the message of Jesus Christ crucified, so that the Holy Spirit may work mightily among us. We need to learn to rely only on faith in Jesus, not on ourselves or on keeping religious rules or traditions. Through the Spirit we're convinced of our new identity in Christ, and we can see others who believe in Jesus the same way. Finally, we need to remember that Jesus was cursed on the cross to set us free from the curse of the law. May God help us learn how to live not by legalism but by faith in Jesus, depending on the Holy Spirit.