

# The Test

A Series on the Letter to the Galatians

Message 3 – “The Laws We Make”

Galatians 2:11-21

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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*...the righteous live by their faith. **Habakkuk 2:4***

Good morning and welcome to St. Paul’s Church. My name is Matt Skillen. I’m one of the pastors here and I have the humble joy of sharing God’s word with you today.

If you are joining us for the first time either in person or online, we welcome you, and I’d like to share with you where we are in a series we are calling “The Test.” Amid a great deal of confusion that seems to be unfolding in our culture, many of us may be waiting to hear the voice of God, and maybe we aren’t hearing him. Or, perhaps more accurately, we aren’t hearing him say what we thought he would say. Looking at all we are facing and all that is before us, it is clear that we are facing a test and the teacher is always quiet during a test.

This test that we are facing has significant ramifications for the body of Christ and the transformational movement for Christ here on Earth. As a teacher, I know the importance of tests. And, now that I have finished with all my own college schooling, I am glad I no longer have to sit through tests in the academic sense, but the tests we face now are far more challenging than the ones we suffered through... I mean complete in school. How we treat one another and pursue our relationship with Christ while the world seems to be changing all around us is an important consideration. As we are tested on every front, how will we respond? It’s as if God is asking us, “What have you learned?”

Our current series focuses on the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatian churches. These relatively new churches were in conflict because they had received the true message of salvation that comes from Jesus Christ alone. This was Paul’s clear message when he helped establish these churches. But shortly following Paul’s departure, a group called the Judaizers came to town to say that in order to be a “true” Christian the Galatians had to know and do certain additional things that Paul didn’t tell them about. Specifically, in chapter 3 of Paul’s letter we learn the Judaizers were teaching the Mosaic Law—the laws and rules delivered to Moses in the Old Testament needed to be followed to the letter if the Galatian people wanted to be truly holy and redeemed. Their thinking here was very literal. The Judaizers believed that if one was to be truly *like* Jesus, he or she needed to adopt Hebrew practices, because Jesus was Hebrew.

What was this law that the Judaizers were pushing onto the Galatians? It required a lot of things, including a great deal of social and dietary restrictions... and circumcision. These were the rules the Israelites lived by for generations when they were first



delivered to Moses up until the arrival of Jesus Christ. This law would not have been part of the Galatian traditions and many of these rules would have been quite foreign to them. But, Paul's message to the Galatians is a message we can still learn a great deal from today. No matter the rules that we think we have to live by, **it is our faith in Christ that matters.**

Imagine, for a moment, what that would have felt like. If you didn't grow up in the church and later became a Christian in your youth or adulthood, you might relate to the Galatians. These new Christians in Galatia had experienced a life-altering transformation. They heard this amazing story about Jesus—God's only son who lived a blameless life and was crucified, dead and buried so that we could live free from sin. He was then raised from the dead to illustrate once and for all the eternal life we have in heaven. To participate in this new life, one had to only believe it. They heard all of this, embraced it and treasured it. But, then to be told they didn't have all the information to be saved? Why, that would have been very difficult to hear; but, being new in their faith and wanting to do well by God—who had saved them from their sins—the Galatians bought into this false message from the Judaizers. In their first test following all of Paul's teaching, the Galatians find out they failed. They were studying all the wrong information.

This reminds me of a story my brother Joe once told in a sermon many, many years ago about a college student—who wasn't a biology major— but waited until his very last semester to take the required science course he needed to complete his general education requirements and to graduate. This student was a natural procrastinator and by the time he got around to filling out his schedule the only class with seats remaining was an upper level course on ornithology—that's right the scientific study of birds.

Now the advanced nature of this course created fifteen weeks of absolute hell on earth for this student. Imagine every waking thought, and some dreams, being occupied with the classification of species and migratory patterns of different types of birds! This kid just about went insane, and his insanity reached a new level when he had to prepare for the final exam. All he knew leading into the exam was that he would have to identify 100 different birds. For several days straight he studied beaks, wings, and plumage patterns. He knew that if could just pass this final—it didn't matter how low the grade was he just needed to pass—he could graduate on time.

Well, you could imagine the horror he felt when we walked into the exam room and saw 100 pictures posted around the room for the final exam and they were all pictures of nothing but birds' feet.....and he didn't study the feet!

He'd studied the wrong thing and therefore had little hope of passing the exam. When we walk in with the wrong information, we have little hope of passing the test. So, here are the Galatians thinking they are doing what they are supposed to do, but then, here comes Paul's rebuke. He says in Galatians 3,

*<sup>1</sup>You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! <sup>2</sup>The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by*



*believing what you heard?* <sup>3</sup>*Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?* <sup>4</sup>*Did you experience so much for nothing? — if it really was for nothing.* <sup>5</sup>*Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?* **(Galatians 3:1-5)**

In this brief transition in Paul's letter, we see a pretty strong rebuke because remember one of our basic lessons we learn from this text.

### **Jesus Christ + Something Else = a false gospel**

I think a prevailing feature of the human experience is that we like to make simple things complex. Do you ever notice that? We look at something so straightforward and simple and immediately say to ourselves, "No, it can't be that easy." We've become largely skeptical to the clear and straightforward things in our lives. So much so that we will often make things more complicated than they need to be.

So, Paul asks a series of questions that will be difficult for the Galatians to answer. He first asks,

- ***"Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard?" (verse 2)***

Paul begins his line of questioning here by addressing the entry point of our relationship with Christ. He asks, point blank, if we came to know the Spirit—that is the very presence of God that dwells with us on Earth—by believing in Christ and the great redemption he brings or by doing a long list of things?

Looking at these remarks, I imagine many of the Galatian Christians had what I like to call in my teaching practice, an "*Oh Yeah...*" moment. In my teaching experience, I've worked with both middle school and college students, I have these moments when I can help a student connect two things together and they give me this look—it's unmistakable—it as if a dark room has been flooded with light and they say, "*Oh yeah...*" Just like that. Can you recall a time (or times) in life when you've said, "*Oh yeah...*"?

The Galatians' "*Oh yeah...*" moment involved them looking back into the not-so-distant past when they first met Paul and heard the remarkable news that all they had done that separated them from God had been wiped away through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Their sins were no longer a factor in their eternity and their fate had been sealed by grace.

The Galatians were not Hebrew, so these practices would not have been part of their lived experiences up to this point, and Paul is conveying through his questioning that the Galatians already believed in Christ. Their salvation was not contingent on a laundry list of acts, but on the pure and unencumbered belief that Jesus Christ had died for their sins. It was true before the Judaizers came to Galatia and it would be true after they left. His answer is unequivocal to us also:



**Your salvation is not contingent on a laundry list of acts that we do, but on the pure and unencumbered belief in what Jesus Christ did for us, he died for our sins.**

He next asks,

- ***"Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?" (verse 3)***

The law was first established when Moses had liberated God's people from over 400 years of slavery in Egypt. Several generations of Abraham's decedents had lived under Egyptian rule and subjugation, and the Law was established to reorient God's people to His heart. In every way, their lives and bodies needed to be shaped and molded so that they could leave behind all that oppressed them in slavery so they could ascend to the great calling God had for his people—to be a royal priesthood for God on Earth.

Setting the law aside for a moment, we read throughout Galatians 3 that Paul reveals something very important that is missing from the Judaizers' belief that our relationship with God is forged through our acceptance and adherence to the Mosaic law. The original promise, or covenant, God made with Abraham and the Israelite people was based on Abraham's faith, not the works he had done or the laws he kept. If you go all the way back to the beginning of the Bible the great promise of God's people began with one man who was remarkably faithful. In Genesis 12 you can read about Abraham's call. God called him to leave his family's land to a place God had specifically set aside for him. From this place, God would raise up generations following Abraham that would one day bless the entire world.

This was a deeply spiritual connection God created with Abraham. And Paul posits that it is through our faith and spiritual connection with God the Father that our true relationship is fostered. The Mosaic law came several years later and was meant to help shape the mind and body while rebuilding the faith of God's people, but it was also meant to be temporary until Christ returned. Paul states that Christian life begins and grows on the principle of faith...

**It is through our faith and spiritual connection with God the Father that our true relationship is fostered.**

His third and final question is

- ***"Does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?" (verse 5)***

Paul then appeals to the Galatians by pointing to the work that God does through us. He supplies us with the Spirit and through the Spirit everything from the ordinary to the extraordinary happens through the Spirit inside each of us. God didn't work through the Galatians because they only ate certain foods or worked a specific way. God moved wildly through this new body of believers because they believed. Their faith was fashioned and forged through the fire of the Holy Spirit, not through the sweat they collected on their brows.



<p><b>Our faith is fashioned and forged through the fire of the Spirit not through the sweat of our efforts.</b></p>
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An important consideration to make here is that Paul's critique of the Law is pretty heavy handed. He isn't alluding that the Law is a curse, but he is clearly saying that anyone who puts themselves under it can begin to view it as burdensome and overwhelming, and that is completely unnecessary if we wish to be more like Christ.

### **What Laws do we put ourselves under?**

During this rather unique moment in our lives together, we've had a rare pleasure of seeing who we are absent of everything that we typically fill our lives with. For people like me with young children and busy careers, everything that was distracting and busying was stopped all at once. What was left was all that was essential. In the quiet of our at-home workspaces, we asked "Why is this happening?" And, "What are we supposed to do now?" God is watching how we will respond. Did we learn anything that he has taught us?

Many of the things that evaporated during the pandemic shutdown were the rules and traditions that we followed week after week at church. The rituals we follow, the things that we do, the ordinary, everyday conversations we have, all of it, was gone. What remained was our relationship and connection to Christ. If you are like me, during the months of March and April I didn't feel as confident in my relationship with Christ. Maybe you did too. I think what happened was everything that we put in front of Christ—the things we filled our worship and daily lives with—were removed and all that remained was a hollow tunnel and somewhere at the end of that long tunnel was Christ, waiting for us.

The activity and work we've attached to our faith has created this false doctrine that says we *have* to attend a certain worship service, or sing specific songs. It says that we can only participate in Communion on a specific day of the month and with specific elements. The rules we've made around grace, faith, love, worship and devotion to Christ have tied us down have potentially kept us at a great distance from the very heart of God, and have therefore kept us at an arm's length away from the very calling and purpose God has on our lives.

Hear me. These things I am talking about are not bad. In fact, they are steeped in a loving and Biblical tradition, but the danger here (Paul would call this a curse) the curse here is that if we put works and acts ahead of our complete and total devotion to Christ we are living out a false gospel, we're studying the wrong information, and through this remarkably testing period of time you may have come to the conclusion, as I have, that there is room for revision and transformation in our worship and devotion to God.

Take a look for a moment at how God has used the pandemic to hit a giant reset button. The things we valued in early March 2020 are now, by in large, of no consequence to us now. Look back at 2019 and take stock of what we worried about and what we cherished. Many of those things may seem superficial now. Examine your heart and ask



yourself if you've put anything in the way of worshiping God that has now evaporated in the reality that is now July 2020.

Friends, the teacher is watching. But he isn't watching from in front of the room as we muddle through a test that we don't have the answers for. He is seated right next to us. How will you respond?