

Grace and the Galatians

In the previous lesson, “Grace and the Ephesians,” it was observed that the covenant that God made with Abraham included all the families on earth by promise. Abraham was not the author of the covenant nor was it due to his achievement. It was based upon the **principle of grace through faith** rather than his works. Yet, I think all of us would agree that, if Abraham had said, “God, I believe in you with all my heart, but I am not willing to leave my father, my kin, and my native land to migrate to an undisclosed place,” his faith would not have been reckoned as righteousness. **The principle of justification by grace through faith included compliance with any specified details.**

How God was to bless all families through Abraham was a mystery kept secret until God revealed it to the Gentiles through Paul. The Gentiles were accepted on the same **principle of grace through faith** to become heirs with Abraham. Specific details of compliance on the part of individuals differed from those expected of Abraham for they included faith in Christ, repentance, and baptism through which they received the gift of the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of their acceptance with Abraham.

Even though Paul wrote *Galatians* before *Ephesians*, reviewing *Ephesians* gives us a better background for understanding what all the fuss was about in *Galatians*. The Law of Moses was given to Abraham’s heirs, his descendents through Jacob/Israel but the promises were not through the Law. Some Jewish disciples were thinking that Gentiles also must come by that Jewish route, thus circumcision, the fleshly mark of the Jew, was being demanded by some of their leaders who were going out among the Gentile churches.

Circumcision came to represent the entire Law of Moses. Paul declared, “*Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law*” (5:2-3).

In his letter to the Galatian churches, Paul met this head-on. He declared the binding of circumcision to be another gospel – a perversion of the gospel of Christ by which they were called into the grace of Christ (1:6-9). It would attribute salvation to Moses instead of Christ alone and base their relationship with God on the **physical** rather than the **spiritual**. To those who had received grace through faith but were being led to think it came through keeping the Law, Paul sternly declared, “*You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love*” (5:4-6). Let me enumerate several emphatic points drawn from these quotations.

1. To make anything not included in the gospel an essential to salvation is perverting the gospel. The whole gospel was preached and obeyed on Pentecost.

2. By binding circumcision (Law) after having been justified by grace through faith had caused some to fall away from grace. Yes, that can happen and did happen!

3. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision amounted to anything! Paul emphasized that by repetition: *“For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation”* (6:15). That meant that neither **keeping the Law of Moses nor not keeping the Law of Moses was of any importance!** Whoa there! Paul cannot be teaching that! But he did -- twice. And he was not contradicting himself.

Paul was adamantly against keeping the law as **a means of justification** which could come only through Christ, but he never condemned one for keeping the law otherwise. It would be good for you to read the entire account of the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15. There it was determined by the apostles, elders, and the whole church that the law (“yoke,” circumcision) could not be bound on the Gentiles, but there is no hint that the Judean disciples would cease respecting Moses’ law which was read in the synagogues every Sabbath. Jesus had said those who would teach the law in the kingdom would be great, and it was to be taught until the new heaven and earth came down out of heaven at the end of the age (Matt. 5:17-19; Rev. 21). In this overlapping period of about forty years, time was given for the **spiritual kingdom to supersede the earthly kingdom** with its combined civil and religious laws. The rituals of the law, however, would become meaningless as they were types and shadows of what was fulfilled in Christ. **The physical types were fulfilled by spiritual truth.** Jesus had told the Samaritan that henceforth people would worship in spirit and truth rather than in those earthly types.

After the Jerusalem conference Paul circumcised Timothy in respect to the Jews (Acts 16:1-3). On his last trip to Jerusalem he *“cut his hair, for he had a vow”* (Acts 18:18). The Judean disciples were still keeping the law when Paul arrived (Acts 21:17-26). It was practiced until their temple, nation, and whole combined civil-religious system were destroyed. And it is not wrong or us today to circumcise, eat kosher foods, and rest on the Sabbath unless we bind it thinking to be justified by it. No rituals of the law, or of any other sort or device or works, could offer forgiveness of sins. But grace could be accessed by faith working through love.

Including himself as a Jew, Paul taught, *“Now before **faith came**, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint **until faith should be revealed**. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be **justified by faith**. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; **for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise”*** (3:23-29). “Before faith came” does not refer to a time when nobody believed, but it refers to the making available the principle of justification (forgiveness) through faith in Christ. The fullness of the mystery was that all believers in all nations, without regard to race, social status, or sex would be one -- a new, united creation by God for good works among men.

4. In their obedience they had received the Spirit as a guarantee of their acceptance, *“For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness.”* The Holy Spirit had testified to the acceptance of Jews and Gentiles on Pentecost, the mixed breed Samaritans, the Gentile

household of Cornelius, and the re-baptized converts of John the Baptist. Then the Holy Spirit was given **to individuals** of all nations at the time of their baptism as a guarantee of their individual acceptance as an heir of Abraham.

The tendency to bind the Law was a shift from the spiritual to the physical, back to earthly Israel. Paul expressed dismay, “*O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?*” (3:1-3). The guarantee of the Spirit had not come through the law nor by identifying with Israel. Believers were the new spiritual Israel, spiritual descendents of Abraham, so why would they want to make it a physical nation again? That is a question we would ask futurists today who look for Christ to return and re-establish a literal kingdom of Israel, thus reverting from a spiritual kingdom to an earthly one. God totally destroyed that whole earthly system in AD 70. Its people had served his purpose though the kingdom itself was not in God’s plan but was born out of rebellion. It gave way to the perfection of God’s redemptive plan in the spiritual kingdom.

This brief presentation is not meant to be a commentary on the epistle to the Galatians. My hope is that you will take a few minutes to read Paul’s letter again to see how these points I have made fit and add meanings often overlooked or misconceived. Although we cannot be justified by meritorious works or keeping of any supposed law, that is not what Paul was writing about. Our justification, like that of Abraham even before there was a nation of Israel, is spiritual being based upon the principle of grace accessed through faith. []

(Cecil Hook; November 2006)