

The Book of Galatians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 5: Faith or Law? The Galatians' Folly

Galatians 3:1-14

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This passage carries Paul's argument for justification by faith into the realm of the Galatians' own experience and into the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Doctrinally, the lesson establishes that the Spirit, righteousness, and the blessing of Abraham all come by faith and not by the works of the law, and it climaxes in the substitutionary work of Christ, who became a curse for us to redeem us from the curse the law pronounces on all who fail to keep it. The teacher should be ready to show why law-keeping can only condemn, since it demands perfect and complete obedience, and why faith in the crucified Christ is the only way the blessing comes.

As in the previous lessons, the works of the law that Paul excludes are the works of the Mosaic law done to earn a standing and to boast, not the obedient response of faith. Abraham is Paul's great example precisely because Abraham believed God, and that faith was a living trust that went on to obey. So the lesson must not be flattened into a bare faith only. The faith that receives the blessing of Abraham is the same living faith that, in response to the gospel, believes, repents, confesses Christ, and is baptized into him, through which we receive the promised Spirit.

Pastorally, the heart of this lesson is the danger of beginning well and then drifting. The Galatians started by the Spirit and were sliding into the flesh, and the same drift threatens every believer who lets the cross fade from view and quietly returns to performance. Aim, then, to fix the students' eyes again on the crucified Christ, to stir wonder at the curse he bore in their place, and to call them to keep living by the same faith in which they began.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul asks, "Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?" (3:2). Why does Paul send the Galatians back to how they first received the Spirit, and what does their answer prove about how a person comes into right relationship with God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul argues from experience before he argues from Scripture. He asks the Galatians to remember the day the Spirit came to them and to answer honestly how it happened. Was it by their law-keeping, or by hearing the gospel with faith? The question answers itself. The Spirit came when they heard and believed, not when they earned anything.

Explain why this is such a powerful argument. The presence of the Spirit was undeniable among them, marked by real and visible effects. If that gift came by faith and not by works, then the most important thing that ever happened to them happened on the principle of grace received through faith. To now adopt law-keeping as the path forward is to contradict the very way their life with God began.

Draw out the doctrine. We come into right relationship with God, and receive his Spirit, by hearing the gospel and responding in faith, not by accumulating merit. This is the consistent pattern of the new covenant: God gives, faith receives. The Galatians' own story preached the gospel of grace back to them.

Apply it to assurance. When we are tempted to wonder whether God accepts us, the answer is not found in our recent performance but in the finished work of Christ received by faith. The same grace that began our walk with God sustains it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Spirit and right standing with God received by faith, not by works of the law
- The new covenant pattern: God gives, faith receives
- Christian experience as confirmation of the gospel of grace
- Assurance grounded in Christ's work rather than recent performance

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul start with the Galatians' experience of the Spirit?
- What does the way we received the Spirit prove about how we are accepted?
- How does remembering grace at the start steady us when we doubt?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul presses, "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (3:3). Where in your own walk have you begun something by grace but slipped into trying to grow or earn God's favor by your own effort and performance?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 3 names the folly exactly: "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" This is the spiritual equivalent of building a foundation on rock and then framing the house on sand. The Galatians had not abandoned Christ outright; they were trying to add their own performance to him, and Paul calls that foolishness.

Help students recognize the drift in themselves, because it is one of the most common patterns in the Christian life. We come to Christ overwhelmed by grace, and then, almost imperceptibly, we begin to relate to God on the basis of our spiritual performance. Good days make us feel

close to him; bad days make us feel rejected. The flesh has quietly taken over what the Spirit began.

Offer some signs of the drift. A joyless, anxious religion. A scorecard mentality that tallies our spiritual successes and failures. A sense that God's pleasure must be re-earned each day. Pride on our strong days and despair on our weak ones. These are symptoms that we are trying to be perfected by the flesh.

Point back to the cure. Growth in grace is not a switch from depending on Christ to depending on ourselves; it is a deepening dependence on Christ. We are perfected the same way we began, by the Spirit, through faith. Maturity looks like trusting Christ more, not needing him less.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The error of beginning in the Spirit and continuing in the flesh
- Performance-based relating to God as a subtle return to law
- Marks of the drift: anxiety, scorekeeping, pride, and despair
- Sanctification by the Spirit through faith, not by self-effort

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you begun by grace and slipped into self-effort?
- What signs of the drift do you recognize in yourself?
- How is mature faith more dependence on Christ, not less?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul reaches back to Abraham, who “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (3:6). What does Abraham’s example teach about the relationship between faith and righteousness, and why does Paul anchor his argument in Abraham rather than in the law of Moses?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul now reaches back across the centuries to Abraham, quoting Genesis: “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” This is decisive, because Abraham lived long before the law of Moses was given. If the father of the faithful was justified by believing God, then righteousness by faith is not a new idea Paul invented; it is the original pattern, older than the law itself.

Explain the word counted, or reckoned. Abraham’s righteousness was not earned; it was credited to him on the basis of his faith. God treated him as righteous because he trusted God’s promise. This is the gospel in seed form: the believer is reckoned righteous, not because of a flawless record, but because faith lays hold of God and his promise.

Be careful to present Abraham's faith accurately, since this guards against a faith only distortion. Abraham's believing was not a bare opinion; it was a living trust that obeyed, leaving his country, offering his son, taking God at his word again and again (Hebrews 11:8–19; James 2:21–23). The faith that was counted as righteousness was the faith that acts. So Abraham is the pattern not of passive belief but of trusting, obedient faith.

Show why Paul anchors his case in Abraham rather than Moses. The Judaizers prized descent from Abraham. Paul agrees that Abraham is the father, but insists that his true children are those who share his faith, not merely his bloodline or his law. The family of Abraham is the family of faith.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Justification by faith as the original pattern, predating the law (Genesis 15:6)
- Righteousness reckoned to faith, not earned by a flawless record
- Abraham's faith as a living, obedient trust, not bare opinion (Hebrews 11; James 2:21–23)
- The true children of Abraham as those who share his faith

Discussion Prompts

- Why does it matter that Abraham was justified before the law was given?
- What does it mean that righteousness was counted to Abraham?
- How does Abraham's obedient faith guard us against a bare faith only?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul says "it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham" (3:7). What does it mean for your identity that, through faith in Christ, you belong to the family of Abraham, and how should belonging to the family of faith shape the way you live?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

"It is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham." This question invites students to claim their identity in the family of faith. To belong to Christ is to be grafted into a family that stretches back to Abraham and forward to every nation, a worldwide people united not by blood or law but by trust in the same God.

Help students feel the dignity and security of this belonging. In a world where people anchor identity in nationality, achievement, or heritage, the believer's deepest family tie is to the people of faith across all time. We are not spiritual orphans; we have fathers and mothers in the faith and brothers and sisters around the globe.

Draw out the implications for how we live. Family membership comes with a family likeness. The children of Abraham are marked by his faith, a willingness to trust God's promise and follow

where he leads, even when the way is unclear. To belong to this family is to be called to walk as Abraham walked, by faith.

Connect identity to community. This family is not an abstraction; it takes visible form in the local congregation, where the children of faith gather, worship, and bear one another's burdens. Belonging to the family of Abraham should deepen our commitment to the family of God we can actually see.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Membership in the family of Abraham through faith in Christ
- Identity rooted in the people of faith rather than blood, nation, or achievement
- The family likeness of faith that trusts and follows God
- The local congregation as the visible family of faith

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to you to belong to the family of faith?
- How does this belonging compare with the identities the world offers?
- How should being Abraham's child shape the way you walk this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul warns that "all who rely on works of the law are under a curse," because the law requires that a person "abide by all things written in the Book of the Law" (3:10). Why does relying on law-keeping bring a curse rather than a blessing, and what does this reveal about every attempt to be saved by our own performance?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul delivers a sobering verdict: "all who rely on works of the law are under a curse." He quotes Deuteronomy to show why. The law pronounces a curse on everyone who does not abide by all things written in it. The standard is total and perfect obedience, and one failure brings the curse. Relying on law-keeping therefore cannot bless us; it can only condemn us, because none of us keeps it all.

Help students feel the trap of the law as a way of salvation. It is not that the law is bad; the law is holy and good. The problem is us. To choose law-keeping as the basis of acceptance is to enter a contract we have already broken, where the smallest violation voids the whole agreement. The law offers life to the one who keeps it perfectly and a curse to everyone else, which means a curse to all.

Apply this to every modern form of salvation by performance. Whenever we try to earn God's acceptance by our goodness, our religion, or our moral record, we step back under this

principle, and the same verdict applies. Partial obedience cannot satisfy a standard that demands everything. This is why no one is justified before God by the law.

Set up the rescue to come. The law leaves us cursed and helpless, which is exactly the point Paul wants us to feel before he reveals the cross. We cannot lift the curse ourselves. Someone will have to lift it for us, and that is precisely what Christ has done.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The law's demand for total, perfect obedience (Galatians 3:10; James 2:10)
- The curse that falls on all who rely on law-keeping, since all fail
- The goodness of the law and the inability of sinful people to keep it
- Every performance-based salvation as a return to the curse

Discussion Prompts

- Why does relying on the law bring a curse instead of a blessing?
- How does the all in keep all of it expose our situation?
- What modern forms of earning put people back under this curse?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul asks whether they “suffered so many things in vain” (3:4). Have you ever been tempted to abandon something you once suffered or sacrificed for in your walk with Christ? What helps you persevere rather than give up what you have begun?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul asks whether the Galatians had “suffered so many things in vain.” They had paid a price to follow Christ, and now they were on the verge of abandoning the gospel for which they had suffered. This question turns to us, asking whether we are tempted to give up what we once sacrificed to gain.

Help students connect with their own history of perseverance. Many have weathered ridicule, loss, broken relationships, or hardship for the sake of following Christ. To drift away now, or to trade the gospel of grace for something lesser, would render that cost meaningless.

Remembering what we have already endured can steel us to keep going.

Name the temptations to give up. Weariness, disappointment, the slow erosion of zeal, the appeal of an easier path, all of these can tempt a believer to abandon what they began. Paul's question is meant to wake us up, to make us count the cost of turning back as well as the cost of going on.

Point to what sustains perseverance. We endure not by gritting our teeth but by fixing our eyes on Christ, who endured the cross for us, and by drawing on the Spirit and the fellowship of the church. The suffering is not in vain when it is joined to the One who suffered for us and who will bring us home.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Perseverance in the faith as essential, not optional
- The cost already paid as a motive to continue
- Common temptations to abandon the walk: weariness, disappointment, ease
- Endurance sustained by Christ, the Spirit, and the church

Discussion Prompts

- What have you suffered or sacrificed in following Christ?
- What tempts you most to give up what you have begun?
- Where do you find strength to persevere rather than turn back?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul contrasts two ways: "The righteous shall live by faith," yet "the law is not of faith, rather 'The one who does them shall live by them'" (3:11-12). What is the fundamental difference between the way of faith and the way of law, and why can the two never be combined as the ground of our standing with God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul sets the two ways side by side. "The righteous shall live by faith," he says, quoting Habakkuk, and then, "the law is not of faith, rather 'The one who does them shall live by them.'" Faith and law operate on opposite principles. Faith receives life as a gift from God; law offers life only to the one who does everything it requires. They cannot be mixed as the ground of our standing, because each excludes the other.

Help students grasp the contrast clearly. The way of law says, do this and live; everything depends on your performance. The way of faith says, Christ has done it, now trust and live; everything depends on his performance received by faith. To try to stand on both at once is to stand on neither, because adding law to faith turns the gift back into a wage.

Show why this distinction matters so much. Many believers live in a confused middle, hoping that Christ has done most of the work while they make up the rest. Paul says this is impossible. We are accepted entirely by grace through faith, or not at all. The relief of the gospel is that the doing has been done by Another.

Guard the truth that the way of faith is not the way of doing nothing. To live by faith is to live, actively, in trust and obedience. The point is not that faith never acts, but that faith does not earn. The righteous live by faith, and that life is a real, obedient life lived in dependence on Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith and law as opposite principles for our standing with God
- The way of law: do and live; the way of faith: trust the One who has done it
- The impossibility of mixing grace and merit as the ground of acceptance (Romans 11:6)
- Living by faith as an active, obedient life that does not earn

Discussion Prompts

- How are the way of faith and the way of law fundamentally different?
- Why can the two never be combined as the basis of acceptance?
- How is living by faith active without becoming a way of earning?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul calls believers to live by faith, not by the flesh. Where is God calling you, in some specific and ongoing area, to trust him rather than rely on your own strength, planning, or control?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question moves the way of faith out of theory and into daily life. To live by faith is not only to be justified by faith at the beginning but to walk by trust in God every day, in the concrete realities of work, family, money, health, and the future. Paul wants a people whose whole life rests on dependence rather than self-reliance.

Help students locate the specific arena where trust is hardest for them. For some it is finances, for others their children, their health, an uncertain future, or a situation they cannot control. The flesh wants to manage, manipulate, and secure outcomes on its own. Faith releases the grip and trusts the Father.

Make clear that trusting God is not passivity. Faith still works, plans, and acts responsibly, but it does so leaning on God rather than on its own strength, and it rests in his outcome rather than demanding its own. Living by faith means doing our part while entrusting the results to the One who loves us.

Encourage one concrete step. Ask each student to name a single area where they will deliberately trust God this week rather than rely on control, and to identify what trusting would actually look like there, perhaps in prayer, in letting go, or in obedient action despite uncertainty.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Living by faith as daily, ongoing dependence on God
- The flesh's drive to control versus faith's trust in the Father
- Faith as active and responsible, not passive
- Entrusting outcomes to God while doing our part

Discussion Prompts

- In what area is trusting God hardest for you right now?
- What does the flesh tempt you to control rather than entrust to God?
- What is one concrete way you will live by faith this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul declares, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'" (3:13), so that the blessing of Abraham and the promised Spirit might come through faith. What does it mean that Christ bore the curse we earned, and how do we receive this blessing through a faith that truly trusts and obeys him, rather than through law-keeping or a bare faith only?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here is the glory of the passage and its heaviest doctrinal weight: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." Having shown that the law leaves us all under a curse we cannot lift, Paul reveals how the curse was lifted. Christ took it. On the cross, the sinless Son of God stood in the place of cursed sinners and bore in himself the penalty the law pronounced against us.

Explain the substitution at the heart of this. Paul quotes Deuteronomy, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree," applying it to the crucifixion. Jesus was treated as accursed, not for any sin of his own, but for ours. This is the doctrine of substitutionary atonement: he received what we deserved so that we could receive what he deserved. As Paul says elsewhere, God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Show the purpose of this redemption. Christ bore the curse so that two things might flow to us by faith: the blessing of Abraham and the promised Spirit. The blessing once spoken to Abraham, that in him all nations would be blessed, reaches the whole world through the cross, and the Spirit comes to dwell in all who believe. What the law could never give, the crucified Christ secures.

Now guard the manner of receiving, so the lesson neither slides into legalism nor into a bare faith only. The blessing comes through faith, but the faith Paul means is the living trust that takes God at his word and responds to him. It is the faith that hears the gospel of the crucified Christ, believes, turns from sin, confesses him as Lord, and is baptized into him, and so receives the promised Spirit (Acts 2:38–39; Galatians 3:26–27). These are not works of the law by which we lift our own curse; Christ alone lifted it. They are simply the empty hands of faith stretched out to receive what he has already accomplished.

End in worship and assurance. The believer who trusts the crucified Christ no longer stands under the curse, because Another has carried it away. Let students feel the weight lift. There is no curse left to bear for the one who is in Christ, only the blessing of Abraham and the gift of the Spirit, received by faith.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Substitutionary atonement: Christ became a curse for us, bearing our penalty (Galatians 3:13; 2 Corinthians 5:21)
- Redemption from the curse of the law accomplished by Christ alone
- The blessing of Abraham and the promised Spirit received through faith
- Saving faith as living trust that believes, repents, confesses, and is baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38–39; Galatians 3:26–27)
- These responses as the empty hands of faith, not works that lift our own curse
- Assurance that no curse remains for those who are in Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that Christ became a curse in our place?
- How does the cross secure what the law could never give?
- How do we receive this blessing through a faith that trusts and obeys, not a bare faith only?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole passage. The Galatians had taken their eyes off the crucified Christ and put them back on their own performance. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you, this week, to keep the cross central and to live by faith in him rather than by the flesh.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone returns to where Paul began, with the crucified Christ portrayed before their eyes. The Galatians' whole problem started when they looked away from the cross and back at their own performance. The lesson ends by calling students to fix their gaze again on Christ crucified and to keep living by the faith in which they began.

Help students see what tends to crowd the cross out of view. Busyness, success, sin, comfort, and even religious activity can all slowly eclipse the cross until it becomes a distant memory rather than a daily reality. The remedy is intentional remembrance, returning again and again to what Christ has done, especially as the church gathers around the Lord's table to proclaim his death.

Press for one specific commitment. Ask each student to name a single practice that will keep the cross central this week and help them live by faith rather than the flesh, perhaps a daily return to the gospel in prayer, a renewed trust in a hard area, or a deliberate rejection of the scorecard mentality.

Close in wonder. The same Christ who was publicly portrayed as crucified bore our curse and gives us his Spirit. To keep living by faith is simply to keep looking at him. Send students home with their eyes back on the cross and their hearts resting in grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The crucified Christ kept central to the Christian life
- Things that eclipse the cross: busyness, success, sin, and even religion
- The Lord's Supper as a regular proclamation of Christ's death (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)
- Living by faith as a continual returning to the cross

Discussion Prompts

- What tends to crowd the cross out of your daily view?
- What practice could keep Christ crucified central this week?
- How does looking again at the cross help you live by faith?