

Galatians 3:1-14 NLT

Causes and Cures for Backsliding

I can still remember it. I was 10 years old and was with my mom and dad and my brothers and sisters on a cold wintry day. We had gone shopping for something. My dad had parked the family station wagon at the bottom of the hill. He parked at the bottom of the hill because it was a little bit icy that day.

I watched my dad come out of the store. As he tried to walk to the car, he accidentally dropped a package. When he bent over to pick the package up his glasses fell off his face. He was able to pick up the package. But when he picked up his glasses his feet slipped from underneath him and he began to slide down the hill toward us.

I watched my dad slide helplessly from the top of the hill all the way to the bottom of the hill until he slid directly underneath the car. I heard words come out of my dad I had never heard before. He literally slid on his back from the top of the hill to the bottom. It was not a pleasant experience. Nor was it a pleasant experience for all of us in the car as we drove home.

Sliding. Sliding is never fun. But backsliding is incredibly dangerous.

The word “backsliding” or “backslider” is used over a 12 times in the King James Bible and mostly in the book of Jeremiah. The term means *“turn away”, “reverse a positive course,” or “fall into a slump.”*

Backsliding is not limited to overtly sinful actions. Christ followers backslide into false teaching and into errors of extremism – any belief or behavior that deviates from a balanced and healthy Christian life – leads to backsliding.

Paul wrote this letter to the Galatian people and it is all about backsliding. The Galatian people were not immoral and did not support pagan worship. They walked away from the truth in a far more subtle way. They willingly and deliberately turned away from the grace of the gospel. It was no less than an act of treason, but it was dressed up in purity and piety. The Galatian people were guilty of backsliding into legalism. It was a direct walk away or turning of their backs on grace.

Galatians 3:1-5 NLT “Oh, foolish Galatians! Who has cast an evil spell on you? For the meaning of Jesus Christ’s death was made as clear to you as if you had seen a picture of his death on the cross. ² Let me ask you this one question: Did you receive the Holy Spirit by obeying the law of Moses? Of course not! You received the Spirit because you believed the message you heard about Christ. ³ How foolish can you be? After starting your new lives in the Spirit, why are you

now trying to become perfect by your own human effort? ⁴ Have you experienced so much for nothing? Surely it was not in vain, was it?"

In Christian circles, legalism will pounce with surprise and seek to rob Christ followers of two priceless doctrines: justification and sanctification.

Remember, justification is defined as *"just as if I had never sinned."* Sanctification comes from the root word *"holy"* and simply means *to be set apart*. The ideas to be set apart for God's use and purpose.

The legalist, Judaizers, in Galatia were attacking justification by teaching that grace alone by faith alone in Christ alone was not enough. These Judaizer teachers were teaching, *"You need to add to Christ's redemptive work on the cross so God will accept you into his family. You have the ability in and of yourself to meet God halfway, add to his grace, to pull yourself up by your bootstraps."*

These legalist teachers attack on sanctification – living a life that is set apart for God's use – was more subtle. They believed that you were saved by grace through faith, but once you were saved you must work hard to please God to continue in your Christian life. They would say, "God did His part to save me; now I need to pick up the baton and run well. When I do good works, God smiles; when I let Him down, He frowns. So, my spiritual growth depends on working as hard as I can to please Him."

If we believe that view of sanctification then instead of singing *"Jesus Paid It All"* we would sing, *"Jesus Paid A Lot."*

In both legalist justification and legalist sanctification the emphasis is on self. We depend on our own strength rather than God's power to save us and grow us in our walk with Christ. When we depend on ourselves, we will almost always emphasize the outward appearance rather than the inward reality.

Paul argued over and over and over again that you cannot work for your salvation. Your salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. The same Holy Spirit who changes our inner being continues His transforming work as we release our will to His and allow Him to live His life through us.

Every dimension of salvation – past, present, and future – comes to us by grace through faith in Christ. We participate by submitting and receiving, not by controlling and completing.

The gospel is so simple and so profound that only a fool would walk away from it or try to change it. That's why Paul's message is so direct. Paul did not pull any punches when he rebuked the Galatian people.

Galatians 3:1 NLT “Oh, foolish Galatians! Who has cast an evil spell on you? For the meaning of Jesus Christ’s death was made as clear to you as if you had seen a picture of his death on the cross.”

When Paul called the Galatian people “foolish” the original language is a word that means *mindless, thoughtless, or ignorant actions*. Paul was basically saying that the Galatians were out of their minds for turning away from Christ who had paid for their sins once and for all. Paul was saying it was absolutely insane for them to turn to their own self-sacrificial way of living.

So, why did these believers in Galatia backslide into legalism? Paul said it was as though someone put an “evil spell” on them. His point was simple, only someone under the influence of a spiritual power would walk away from the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith.

It was almost like these legalists were magicians. It was like they used sleight-of-hand to replace God’s grace with man’s works. As they did that, they shifted the focus away from their salvation which was received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Paul then posed a rhetorical question that was designed to expose how foolish legalism really was. He first reminded the Galatian people that they did not receive salvation by works of the law, but by simply hearing the gospel and responding in faith.

Galatians 3:2 NLT “Let me ask you this one question: Did you receive the Holy Spirit by obeying the law of Moses? Of course not! You received the Spirit because you believed the message you heard about Christ.”

Every Christ following Galatian knew that they had been saved because they believed the message that Paul had preached. Paul’s message again was grace alone by faith alone in Christ alone would secure salvation forever. You did not need to add one thing.

Then Paul continued to build on the fact that the Spirit came into their lives by grace through faith and for Paul it was a logical implication: If they began their salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, there is no way they could be made perfect by the flesh. Listen to what Paul said again.

Galatians 3:3-4 NLT “How foolish can you be? After starting your new lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort? ⁴ Have you experienced so much for nothing? Surely it was not in vain, was it?”

Paul found it inconceivable that if the people had been saved by grace through faith why would they try to replace that with their own works – the law.

They could not improve on what God had already provided for them but that is exactly what the legalist teachers were getting them to do.

Paul was completely dumbfounded that the people would turn away from what he had just taught them and what they had just received.

But these teachers that came behind Paul were very smooth. That's why Paul refers to them as magicians who put a spell on the people. Paul is angry, dumbfounded, and did I mention angry, that the people would turn away so quickly from the gospel – the good news – that Paul had shared.

Let's read on...

Galatians 3:6-9 NLT “In the same way, ‘Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith.’⁷ The real children of Abraham, then, are those who put their faith in God.

⁸What's more, the Scriptures looked forward to this time when God would make the Gentiles right in his sight because of their faith. God proclaimed this good news to Abraham long ago when he said, ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’⁹ So all who put their faith in Christ share the same blessing Abraham received because of his faith.”

Even though Paul had already made his case he had not completely conquered the argument. In order to break the spell of legalism that these teachers of the law (Judaizers) were teaching Paul would have to win the contest on the Judaizer's (teachers of the law) own turf.

These teachers of the law – Judaizers – had so strongly emphasized Moses and the law that God gave to Moses as the preeminent teaching. To counter the Judaizers teaching Paul would have to reach further back into Jewish history. Paul reached all the way back to Abraham. Abraham was the first patriarch and you might say the founding father of the Jews. It was Abraham who received the original promise upon which everything else rested. Paul showed from Abraham's life that the very father of the Jewish nation had himself been saved by grace through faith, not by keeping the law

Galatians 3:6 NLT “In the same way, ‘Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith.’”

Paul was quoting from **Genesis 15:6** where Abraham responded to God's promise of an heir and countless descendants. Abraham was an old and was childless, but he believed that God would keep his word and do what he had promised. In other words, Abraham responded to God by faith alone.

So, the first Hebrew and the father of the Jews was not justified by keeping the law but by faith. It was more than a decade later that God instituted circumcision. Moses would not receive the Law until 400 years later.

So, Abraham did not find favor with God because of his personal devotion, public ritual, or his hard work. Abraham found favor with God by grace alone through faith alone, apart from anything Abraham had done or would do, God declared him righteous.

Paul then went on to explain that the Galatians themselves, Jews, and Gentiles alike, are the spiritual descendants of Abraham.

Galatians 3:7 NLT “The real children of Abraham, then, are those who put their faith in God.”

Those who are of faith are the real children of Abraham. Those who experience salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone are the children of God and descendants of Abraham.

Paul even pointed out that God had already predicted the Gentiles future salvation by grace through faith in **Genesis 12:3 “All nations will be blessed by you.”**

Paul’s argument went something like this: You Galatians a Jewish Christians. You want a gospel that is anchored in the Old Testament. You already have it. You and all people who come to Christ by faith are the spiritual descendants of Abraham, the father of the Jews. Circumcision, the law, Pharisees, and Judaizers all came later. Faith came first.

Galatians 3:10-14 NLT “ But those who depend on the law to make them right with God are under his curse, for the Scriptures say, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the commands that are written in God’s Book of the Law.’ ¹¹ So it is clear that no one can be made right with God by trying to keep the law. For the Scriptures say, ‘It is through faith that a righteous person has life.’ ¹² This way of faith is very different from the way of law, which says, ‘It is through obeying the law that a person has life.’

¹³ But Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’ ¹⁴ Through Christ Jesus, God has blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing he promised to Abraham, so that we who are believers might receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith.”

Some things are black-and-white. For example, you are either married or you are not. You can’t be both single and married. You’re either dead or alive;

there is such thing as being both dead and alive. Sorry, zombie movies are not real. Some things are very simple because they are black-and-white.

The same is true with the Christian faith. You are either a Christ follower or you are not. You are either saved or unsaved. It really is simple; you relate to God by grace through faith or you don't relate to Him at all. It truly is as simple and plain as peanut butter and jelly.

But if you want to work for your salvation then you must keep the law – perfectly. You will have to keep every law from your first breath of life to your last breath at death.

James 2:10 NLT “For the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God’s laws.”

The moment a person breaks the law, he or she falls under the judgment of God which Paul calls “the curse of the law.”

As we just read Galatians 3:10 Paul continued his argument from the Old Testament to show the superiority of a life that is lived by faith. He explained that the law, rather than adding anything to salvation, actually nullifies righteousness. Why? Because all people, including those who try to live by the law, will always stumble. So, instead of establishing their perfect righteousness, the law places followers under penalty. And as Paul wrote in Romans the penalty is death (Romans 3:23).

The problem Paul had with the Judaizers who were teaching that you could earn salvation by keeping the law was that the Judaizers were picking and choosing what laws they would follow. They basically cherry picked the laws they wanted to follow and ignored the other laws.

Because the law is a complete unit of legislation, if we are to have righteousness from the law, we must keep every commandment of the law perfectly. If we fail in even the smallest command, we become lawbreakers and fall under its condemnation.

Paul's point, then, is that everyone who fails to keep the law in its entirety lives under the shadow of God's certain judgment.

In Galatians 3:11 Paul quoted Habakkuk.

Galatians 3:11 NLT “So it is clear that no one can be made right with God by trying to keep the law. For the Scriptures say, ‘It is through faith that a righteous person has life.’”

During the time of Habakkuk Israel had broken the Law time and time again and God revealed to Habakkuk that Israel was going to be taken captive by another country, Babylon. It was here that Habakkuk said, **“It is through faith that**

the righteous person has life.” Israel had tried to keep the law and failed miserably, and Habakkuk made a strong statement that righteousness comes by faith not by law.

Law and faith cannot go together – they are like water and oil. The two are mutually exclusive. So, those who attempt to be saved – or, really, to save themselves – by any means other than God’s grace through faith fool themselves. Instead of receiving a blessing because of their efforts to obey the law, Paul says they fall under a curse. So how does faith remove us from the curse of the law?

Paul made it very clear in Galatians 3:13.

Galatians 3:13 NLT “But Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’”

Jesus Christ by suffering and dying on a tree – a cross of wood – he experienced the kind of death the law is reserved for those who are cursed.

Jesus Christ was the only one to ever fulfill the law perfectly, He voluntarily submitted to the punishment associated with condemned who had not kept the law. Yet he didn’t die as a result of his own sin, but as a substitute for those who actually deserved the punishment – you and me.

The word in the original language for “*rescued*” refers to purchasing or ransoming a person, as a slave might be purchased from the slave market. Once the slave was purchased the new owner would then give the slave his papers that declared him to be free. Consequently, the slave was rescued.

Jesus Christ was sinless and perfect. He came to this sin infested earth. He voluntarily took on what we deserved, the judgment of God against sin, and gave us what we could never earn: a right standing before God. Why? Paul closes his section with two reasons for the steep price Christ paid to purchase those who believe.

First, he purchased us to extend to us the blessing that was promised to Abraham.

Second, he redeemed us so that he could give us the gift of the Holy Spirit through faith.

God’s plan of salvation did not need to relax one letter of His perfect law to accommodate you and me who couldn’t get through a single day without breaking the law. Instead, God sent His perfect son to fulfill every letter of the law for you and for me and to suffer the law’s sentence of death for us. Why, then, would anybody once saved by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ

seek their own righteousness and the law – which Christ had already been fulfilled? To backslide into legalism would be a slap to the gospel and to the face of God who alone saves us by his grace.

So, what do we take home?

First, You Cannot Earn Your Salvation, It Is a Free Gift. Adding anything to the gospel of grace causes it to not be the gospel of grace. The gospel of grace is grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. You take it is a gift and receive the blessing of the gift.

Second, Don't Let Legalism Rule Your Life.

If you see legalism in any form run from it. Whether it is legalistic justification or legalistic sanctification, get away from it. Legalism will make a rational appeal, quoting Bible verses – usually out of context that pronounce the goodness of works. It will also tug emotions like fear. We don't walk in fear we walk in faith grounded in grace.

Third, You Can't Reason with Insanity. It is absolutely insane to try and keep the law because it's impossible. Paul called the Galatians foolish for backsliding from the grace of God into a works-based faith – legalism.

You have received God's grace and you received His grace by faith in Jesus Christ. We don't add to it and we don't take away from it, we live in it. When we live in it, we live free. We are free to love and serve our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is our law. Jesus Christ is our guide. Jesus Christ is your only hope. It is grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. Anything else is just backsliding.