

Lent: Alienation from Christ

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Galatians 5:2-4

There is an approach to the Lenten season that alienates you from Christ; an approach that is, in fact, a falling away from grace! (Galatians 5:2-4). It is my purpose here to help you avoid such a falling away and instead refresh your hope and joy as you recall the death and resurrection of our Lord and only Savior, Jesus Christ. And to do this I am going to remind you of the *one* gospel principle that will serve as an anchor for your soul and ensure you do not drift away from Christ and toward destructive religiosity.

And that principle is this: *The biblical command to repentance and faith is preceded by God's prior acceptance.* In other words, repentance and faith are *the result* of God's prior acceptance of you in His Son and his finished work on your behalf. This means, no one turns from sin and death and looks to Christ alone for salvation apart from *first* being "born of God" (John 1:12-13; 3:3-8; 6:44-45,65). It is the "kindness, forbearance and patience" of God that leads you to repentance (Romans 2:4). Yet, many people enter the Lenten season believing just the opposite, that is to say, they believe repentance and faith *originates in themselves*. They engage in fasting and other acts of deprivation believing these things are a necessary preparation in order to *move themselves* toward the cross and resurrection Sunday. This is not the biblical gospel. It is another gospel, and is in fact, no gospel at all (Galatians 1:6-9).

This is because God has already dealt with our sin at the cross and, therefore, the gospel is the proclamation of an accomplished salvation on our behalf by an all-sufficient Savior. There are no supplementary acts of piety that can ever prepare us to come to true repentance and faith in Christ. Another way of saying this is to say the biblical imperative is always preceded by the indicative. We repent because it is indicative of the regenerate mind and heart to do so, and not in order to evoke regeneration. But even for those who have experienced this gracious work of the Spirit the danger remains of reverting back to thinking that works of piety somehow ensure God's continued acceptance. There is a world of difference between the Christian life that is marked by obedience to Christ's teaching in response to God's acceptance, and performing works of righteousness in order to secure or retain God's acceptance. The former is biblical and

the latter is heresy and does in fact alienate you from Christ and lead you to a falling away from grace.

This is precisely what was happening with the new converts in the ancient region of Galatia. These people had heard the gospel and had a genuine experience of the Spirit as a result. But false teachers had entered the region and began to teach that to be true Christians they must supplement their new found, Spirit-birthed faith in Christ with circumcision and other Jewish identity markers. Therefore, Paul writes,

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. ²I 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? ³Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh? ⁴Have you experienced so much in vain—if it really was in vain? ⁵So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard? ⁶So also Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Understand then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham (Galatians 3:1-7).

The false Christian leaders insisted that Paul’s gospel was incomplete, and genuine conversion must include the religious rite of circumcision, the sign of God’s covenant made with Abraham (Genesis 17:9-14). On the surface, the argument of the false leaders seemed sound, even biblical, so much so that many within Christendom later came to view baptism as New Testament circumcision. For the converts at Galatia, it turned out that circumcision only led the parade of other requirements. Soon the Galatians were also “observing special days and months and seasons and years!” (Galatians 4:10). In response, Paul writes, “I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you” (4:11). Likewise, throughout the centuries, much of Christendom has adopted a Judaized mindset by also requiring special observances of days, months, seasons, and years. True Christians, it is thought, must do these things. The question we must ask is this: Would Paul also fear that somehow this letter to you was a wasted effort?

I realize these are sobering words. It is very difficult to now call into question a tradition many of you have observed for decades. So let me make this suggestion: Use this Lenten season to consider what I have said; search the Scriptures for yourself and

pray for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. And then do something very much in keeping with Lent, and that is, repent of any thinking that places you either in the initiatory position with God as the respondent in conversion, or if you are confident that you are in Christ, repent of any thinking that God's continued acceptance of you is due to your works of piety. And then rejoice in the Lord, your Savior. Let me now close with this apostolic exhortation,

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. ⁴ But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. ⁸ This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone (Titus 3:3-8).

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