

LESSONS IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR

GRACE: SHIFTING GEARS

EPHESIANS 3:1-3

Let me ask you a question... Do you believe in love at first sight? I do. It happened to me once. I'll never forget the moment I first laid eyes on her. I spotted her at a distance. She was sitting across a crowded parking lot. As I approached her my heart started pounding. My pulse was racing a mile a minute. I walked right up and touched her. I had to have her. She was the one for me! **SHE was a 1970 Ford Mustang – a real beauty!** She was canary yellow - with a half, black vinyl roof. She had a wood-grain dash – and white and black checkerboard cloth seats... What a knockout! I spotted her in the parking lot at Hub Ford.

The moment I got her home I started washing and waxing. I had the finish was so slick a fly couldn't land on the hood without sliding off. But I had a problem that prohibited me from moving forward in this newfound relationship. My 1970 Mustang had a standard transmission, and I didn't know how to drive a stick. I was *stuck* on the *stick*! The enjoyment and freedom I expected to experience was delayed in coming – it was held-up for a week or so - until I learned how to shift gears!

And this can happen to you spiritually... For years you're ingrained with a *work hard attitude* and a *performance mentality*. Folks are always *laying down the law*, expecting you to *live up!* But then you embraced Jesus, and enter a new relationship with God. It's a relationship based on grace - it operates by faith. But to enjoy this new relationship you have to shift gears. And if you don't - you get stuck. Sadly, some believers never move forward in their relationship with God because *they're unwilling to shift from law to grace – they fear transitioning from works to faith – they fail to move their confidence from flesh to Spirit*. When you become a Christian you enter a New Covenant that establishes new terms – and you have to adjust your thinking accordingly.

A relationship with Jesus is the most fulfilling relationship you can know. Give your life to Jesus and you become a brand new person. You're squeaky clean. God even puts the power of the Spirit under your hood. But the enjoyment of that relationship is sometimes delayed until you learn to shift gears. You don't go very far with God - or do much for God - until you learn how to shift it into the grace gear, and unleash His power.

This is why Paul writes to the Galatians. He led them to Jesus. He saw their initial joy and zeal. Surely, they were *saved*, but now they were *stuck*. God declared their freedom – but their failure to believe prolonged their bondage. The Galatians were free, yet the realization hadn't sunk in. They kept reporting back to prison. The Galatians were treating salvation as if it were a furlough instead of a full and permanent pardon. As Jesus said in John 8, **"If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."** History tells us that the Galatians were ancient Hillbillies – uneducated, backwoods people. They were simple, and gullible, and easily misled. They needed to be taught to shift into grace. And that's what happens in Galatians 3. Paul gives the Galatians, and us, a lesson on shifting gears.

Let's read our text, Galatians 3:1-3, **"O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?"**

Notice how these three verses break down... In verse 1, Paul tells the Galatians their problem is more a result of *stupidity* than *naivety*. He **shakes them up** with a candid rebuke. In verse 2, he **takes them back** to the beginnings of their salvation. He asks them why they think God has changed the way He treats His people. Finally in verse 3, Paul boils down his conclusion into a question. He **makes them think** about how they need to relate to God going

forward. Paul *shakes them up*... he *takes them back*... he *makes them think*. If your Christian life has stalled out... If you're stuck, and having trouble shifting gears - listen to Paul's important instructions to the Galatians...

First, Paul **shakes them up!** He states in verse 1, "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified?"

I've got a list this morning entitled, "*The Top 10 Politically Correct Ways to Say Someone is Stupid.*" You could just come out and call them an idiot, but you can't be offensive. You have to be more subtle, a little more PC.

- 10) He's a few fries short of a happy meal.
- 9) The wheel is spinning, but the hamster is dead.
- 8) She couldn't pour water out of a boot if instructions were on the heel.
- 7) His elevator doesn't go to the top floor.
- 6) The light is on, but nobody's home.
- 5) He's got too much yardage between the goal posts.
- 4) Her cheese slid off her cracker.
- 3) An intellect rivaled only by garden tools.
- 2) He's as smart as fish bait.
- 1) His voicemail isn't taking any more messages.

Obviously, Paul is making no attempt here to be politically correct. He doesn't beat around the bush. He says it straight out, "O foolish Galatians!" Listen to how a few other translations render the phrase... The New English Bible puts it, "You stupid Galatians." The Amplified Version puts it, "O you poor and silly and thoughtless and unreflecting and senseless Galatians." The AV always lives up to its name. And my favorite rendering comes from the Philips translation, "You dear idiots..." Paul isn't trying to flatter them, but shock them and wake them up.

It reminds me of a con-artist named *George C. Parker*. Not long after the Brooklyn Bridge opened in 1883, Parker decided to try and sell it to an unsuspecting tourist. The sale was so easy, he tried it again. Before long Parker had abandoned his other cons and was selling the bridge full-time. Over the years George Parker sold the Brooklyn Bridge for as little as \$50 - and as much as \$50,000. He once allowed an unsuspecting buyer to purchase the bridge in installments – *put him on a payment plan*. Over the years the police were called in countless times to stop supposed owners from erecting toll booths that they were promised would make them rich. For George Parker Brooklyn Bridge sells remained brisk for 45 years.

Actually, Parker did so well selling the Brooklyn Bridge he branched out and started marketing Madison Square Garden, Grant's Tomb, even the Statue of Liberty. In 1928 police finally shut him down and threw him in jail. So the next time you hear a fanciful proposal, followed by the line, "And if you believe that, I've got a bridge in Brooklyn I want to sale you" - realize, you wouldn't be the first gullible person to take the bait. The old adage is true, "There's a sucker born ever minute."

And the Galatians proved to be *spiritual suckers*. Religious con-artists were trying to sell them a commodity that wasn't even for sale. With their good works, and rituals, and holy intentions they were attempting to purchase the spiritual equivalent of the Brooklyn Bridge. They tried to buy *THE bridge* - not the one that spans the East River in New York City - but the bridge between man and God – our salvation!

The Galatians forgot what the Scripture said about our good works. It's graphic. Isaiah 64:6 says that our righteous deeds are "like filthy rags..." The Hebrew phrase literally means, "used menstrual cloths." I'm not trying to gross you out, but here's what God thinks of your attempts to pay off your sin. *Our goodness* isn't good enough for *our God!* In essence, these Galatians were taking the mechanic's greasy rags - the janitor's soiled toilet brush - the garbage collector's filthy gloves – and were trying to swap them for the blessings and bounty of Almighty God. *Is anybody home?* Now you know why Paul calls them, "You dear idiots!"

Yet, what about us? Do we try to buy THE Bridge by praying... "God, if you forgive me this once, I'll never miss another Sunday." Or "God, I'll teach Sunday School, if you'll help me make this big sale. Or "God, you see me volunteering to serve You, now I need You to do your part and provide me that raise, or that promotion, or that new house." Are we playing tit for tat with God? "Lord, if You scratch my back, I'll scratch Yours?" Are we trying to buy a bridge that's not for sale?

When you believe Jesus died and rose in your place, you instantly become as right with God as you can get! You receive His righteousness. We obtain and maintain God's favor by grace alone through faith alone. In Christ you're entitled to God's blessings not because of what you do or don't do, but because you're "in Christ." *It's location, location, location...* Jesus paid the price in full. You can't improve on it, or add to it, or enhance your status anymore than you can earn it – it's by grace through faith. The bridge to God is not for you to buy! In Christ we already own it! Paul doubts the Galatians had been so stupid on their own. They had help. He figures they were tricked. He asks, "Who has bewitched you?" And let me ask you the same question, "Who has bewitched you?"

Let me challenge you to look in the rearview mirror of your life... who started applying all the pressure? Where did the condemnation originate? Who started you down the guilt trip you're been on for years? Who started pointing out how little you measure up? Who's the person that's been hassling - and brow-beating - and sowing seeds of confusion? Where in the world did you hear that you had to *keep this rule - or perform that service - or give this offering* for God to be pleased with you?

Was it a misguided Sunday School teacher? Perhaps, it was a pushy preacher? Maybe it's a relative who's stuck in tradition - or you've been listening to a legalistic friend - or could it be your own over-worked conscience? Paul is saying, *Identify the source!* Or maybe you've just picked up the wrong idea from the world we live in. As I said last week, nothing is as foreign to man's thinking as the concept of grace. No one else treats us with the grace God demonstrates. You may've figured God would just treat you like everyone else?

When you look back in the rearview mirror of your life you see everyone sending you the same message... Your teachers said, "Make the grades." Your coach yelled, "Have some guts." Your parents told you, "Make us proud." Now your boss reminds you, "Do you want to get paid?" Everywhere you turn people expect you to perform. Even your shoes say, "Just do it!" That is, until we come to God. He says, "YOU can't do it."

As far as God is concerned, you don't even have to try. He wants us to relax, and rest in a love we don't deserve! *Stop toiling and start trusting.* In Christ the work is finished! All that's left is to walk by faith. God has clothed you in purity, and surrounded you with peace, and empowered you with love, *but you have to shift gears and learn to trust.*

Paul shakes them up. He pinpoints their problem. The Galatians have been victimized by false teaching. But now he explains the solution. He **takes them back** to the early moments of their salvation. Verse 2, "This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?" He wants to remind the Galatians, and us, *of the terms under which God has granted us His acceptance.* Was it... "the works of the law, or the hearing of faith?"

Under the covenant God gave Moses the Jews had to try and earn God's favor. For 2000 years they worked at it - keeping commandments, and offering sacrifices, and paying tithes, and observing the rituals and feasts. Demonstrating their worthiness - that's what the Law was all about. But try as they might they kept failing short of God's standards. Understand, the Law required perfection. If you wanted to live under the law you were expected to keep the whole Law. James 2:10, "For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all." The Law was an all or nothing proposition... Even if you were able to obey the Law with 99.9% accuracy, that 99.9% was still not enough...

By the way, 99.9% sounds good, but it still falls terribly short... Think about it this way... If the USPS handled letters with just 99.9% accuracy that means they still mishandle 659,340 pieces of mail every day. Just 99.9% perfection would mean 20,000 drug prescriptions were filled incorrectly last year – 880,000 credit cards are printed with wrong information – 315 words in the Webster's Dictionary are misspelled – and American hospitals give twelve babies to the wrong parents each day. Just 99.9% accuracy means your heart would miss 100 beats a day.

That's why 99.9% *perfection* is not perfection at all. 99.9% won't cut it. And this doesn't bode well for folks living under the Law. If 99.9% obedience sends a person to hell – where do you think 88%, or 63% - or good ole half-the-time 50% obedience is going to get you? What about 20% - every-now-and-again obedience?

Paul takes the Galatians back to the outset of their faith, and asks them to tell him, what the Law of Moses ever did for them? Their salvation – and their relationship with God - had nothing to do with them keeping the Law. The Galatians were Gentiles. They were saved, and baptized, and filled with the Spirit before they ever heard of the Jewish Law. It wasn't until false teachers arrived that they became acquainted with the Law of Moses. Paul had preached to them the grace of God and the cross of Jesus Christ. The Galatians had become Christians through simple faith!

That's also how they received the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul asks specifically, how "**did you receive the Spirit?**" ... *by the law or by faith?* This is where the testimonies we often hear from other Christians give us the wrong impression. I remember folks standing up in my childhood church, and declaring, "**When I finally laid those cigarettes on the altar God broke through in my life.**" or "**When I yielded to God's call to be a missionary, He filled me with the Holy Spirit.**" As if making a dire sacrifice - or committing to some great task - is what brings on God's blessing. That's simply not true. On the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was first poured out on the Church, the disciples weren't engaged in sacrifices, or taking oaths, or pledging to embark on gigantic endeavors - *all that happened later, as a result of being filled with the Holy Spirit.* Before the power fell the disciples were waiting. Just sitting, and asking, and trusting God to bless them!

Notice, God doesn't change the terms of our relationship in midstream. He doesn't say "**It takes faith to get started, but after you're a Christian I'm going to hand you a long list of chores I expect you to stay up with...**" That's marriage – not Christianity! God doesn't reward us based on our completion of His honey-do list. God never says "**Have faith and you'll be forgiven, but if you want to be blessed it's going to take MORE than faith.**" Write it down, all God's blessings are received by grace through faith! This is how God will treat us for all eternity. The terms never change.

In 1959 Ted Williams had an off season. Ted was 40 years old and suffered a pinched nerve in his neck. As a result, a lifetime 344 hitter, batted just 254. The Red Sox ownership wanted Ted back in 1960, and offered him the same salary, but he refused. He insisted on a pay cut. Ted Williams told the Red Sox, "**I don't want what I didn't earn.**" And everybody's tendency is to applaud the slugger's mentality... but when it comes to our spiritual status this is the attitude we need to avoid. Don't think it's because you bat 300 that you deserve God's blessing – but if you go into a slump... if your *obedience average* falls a bit... you'll have to take a salary cut – you'll no longer be deserving of God's blessing... No, even if you were bating 400 you still wouldn't be worthy.

A lot of Christians live under the pressure to perform and measure up. They forget they were never deserving of God's favor in the first place. I love how Mark Twain put it, "**Heaven goes by favor. If it went by merit, you would stay out, and your dog would go in.**" Remember, Heaven is a party, and nobody who's there deserves to be. We're all heaven crashers.

Over the years I've talked to many believers who live under heavy guilt. They feel like second class Christians. They never seem to enjoy their relationship with God. They tell me, "**I just don't deserve God's blessing.**" And I couldn't agree more, *but nobody does!* That's what grace is all about - having faith enough to walk in a love you really don't deserve! You received the Spirit by faith - and you walk in the Spirit by faith! Paul is saying in verse 2, since you **started by faith** then **continue by faith!**

Paul *shakes them up.* He *takes them back* – and finally in verse 3, he **makes them think.** He asks the Galatians another question, "**Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect in the flesh?**" In other words, in the Christian life, the way you *begin* is the way to have *fun!* You never, ever, never stop relating to God by grace!

Recently, I ran across some questions I'll bet you never thought to ask.

Why did kamikaze pilots wear helmets?

If nothing sticks on Teflon, how do they stick Teflon to the pans?

Why do they put braille on the number pads of *drive-though* ATMs?

Why is "*abbreviation*" such a long word?

What was the best thing *before* sliced bread?"

But here's another question you may've never thought to ask... Why, after starting out as a Christian with a spark of God's Spirit... after being washed, and cleansed, and born anew by the same Spirit... after growing and becoming fruitful through the activity of the Spirit... after being sealed and secured by the presence of the Holy Spirit... after being filled and gifted by the power of the Spirit... *after all that*... Please explain to me why would anyone abandon faith in the Spirit to put their trust in the flesh?

And understand, what Paul means by the word "**flesh**." Isn't it interesting how the word "*flesh*" just sounds evil, "ffffleeeshhhh." You immediately figure that *flesh* gets handled by the vice squad. Flesh means skin-flicks and peep shows. Flashers and slashers are into the flesh. But the flesh can also get dressed up and come to church. It can look religious. The flesh can masquerade as righteousness and holiness. It can even stand in a pulpit and preach the Gospel. Simply put, the word "**flesh**" is me without the Holy Spirit – it's what you and I are apart from Jesus.

Understand, we can be *in the flesh* while attempting to serve the Lord. The truth of the matter is that a lot of good deeds are done *in the flesh*. To serve the Lord without the Lord - to serve Him in our own strength – driven by our own selfish motivations – are ways of walking *in the flesh*! **Unrighteousness AND self-righteousness are examples of the flesh.**

The prophet Zechariah was called by God to restore hope to a discouraged people, especially their disheartened leader, Zerubbabel. Israel had returned from Babylon to the land of Judah, but the work of rebuilding the Temple had been ignored. For two decades Zerubbabel had tried to rebuild Solomon's Temple, but the work had faltered and fizzled.

In Zechariah 4:6 God assures Zerubbabel that the impossible will come to pass, "**This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel, Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit... Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain! And he shall bring forth the capstone with shouts of 'Grace, grace to it!'**" God predicts that when the rebuilt Temple gets its finishing touches everyone will sing... "**Grace, grace to it!**" In the end, the only reason given - the only glory shown – has nothing to do with man's prowess – all the praise will go to the glory of God's grace. God will do the work - not by might, nor by power, but by His Spirit. Grace will prevail - and that's how God plans to build His Temple today.

Don't think you can live a fruitful life for God by *law* and *works* and *flesh*. Relying on rules - and striving to meet external standards - and trying to grow in our own strength - will never produce a life that glorifies God. Law doesn't produce permanent change in the lives of God's people. It might curtail sinful behaviors for a time... *but it can't transform our heart*. Only through His Spirit, will our lives be turned into a Temple. God wants us to *house His praise* and *bring Him glory*. But when His work in us is complete, and the capstone is laid, all the shout-outs will go to grace!

When I look in my rearview mirror there was a time in my life when I saw Christianity as a *treadmill*. In contrast, today I see it as a *hammock*. If you're just looking at a *gal on a treadmill*, or a *guy in a hammock* you might think there's little difference. Both folks are moving, and active, and swaying. But just climb on board and you'll quickly notice the difference. The treadmill is toil and tension. The pace is external. Your movement is forced. You have to run to keep up. Slack off just a little and you crash. On a treadmill you're pushed and pushed to do more, but it's never enough. A hammock though is about resting and relying. You're supported by the hammock's strength. It bears the burden. It holds you up. The pace is easy and natural. A hammock is no sweat. You just relax and stay put.

And your Christian life is either a *treadmill* or a *hammock*! Are you running on the treadmill of guilt and performance – exercising to build up your own *self-righteousness*? Or are you trusting in the *righteousness of Jesus* to hold you up? Are you resting and abiding in Him? This is why I say, you've got to shift gears... Off the treadmill and into the hammock. On the treadmill you'll burn out. But in the hammock you'll renew your strength. You've got to shift gears. Go from *grunt* to *grace*.

This is why Paul tells us in Galatians 5:25, "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit." It's God's Spirit that gives us spiritual life. That's how we became a Christian in the first place. Through the Spirit we're born anew – it's by trusting in God's Spirit, not by relying on our own efforts. And if life comes through the Spirit, why not growth and fruitfulness? We're not saved by the Spirit, then forced to grow through the flesh. Again, it's a hammock life. Jesus said, "The branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me." It's not what I do, but Who I hang on to – *are you hanging with Jesus?*

Let me close with a story. My son, Zach, was 7 at the time - he and I were running errands, when we stopped by my parent's house for a snack. No one was home that day, but I had a key. I walked in and helped myself to what was in the fridge... But Zach was noticeably uneasy. I asked him what was wrong. He said, "Dad, I feel like we're breaking in." I might've felt at home enough to invade the icebox, but Zach didn't. I spent several minutes explaining to him that me coming into my parent's house, was the same as him walking into our house. I assured him we had granddaddy's permission to fix a snack. When he finally understood, Zach breathed a sigh of relief, and said, "Okay, let's party!"

That illustrates what I'm saying today... Zach felt guilty when he had nothing for which to feel guilty about. The condemnation he felt was self-imposed. He wasn't sure he was entitled to the father's blessing - but once he knew the truth - he didn't waste any time believing it and enjoying it! Some of us need to take God at His Word. We believe in grace doctrinally. We try to show grace to others. But we're still not applying God's grace to our own lives. **It's time to shift gears!** You need to believe that the snack belongs to you! You don't have to buy it – or earn it - or feel guilty for taking it – God's blessing is free and it's for our enjoyment!... **Let's learn to shift our believing into the grace gear!**