

“What Does He Who Supplies the Spirit Do?”

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Sermon for 9 January 2022

Text: Galatians 3:5-6; Matt 26:14-15

5 So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works [a]miracles among you, do it by works of [b]the Law, or by hearing [c]with faith? Provides you with the Spirit and works of power by works of law, or of faith—which appears to be opposing venues, meaning one or the other! **6 Just as Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.** Credit is rendered “reckoned to,” as in “attributed to” Abraham.

14 Then one of the twelve, named Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests 15 and said, “What are you willing to give me [a]to [b]betray Him to you?” And they set out for him thirty [c]pieces of silver.

Abraham believed God and Judas did not. Abraham was saved, Judas was damned. It is impossible to come up with more disparate outcomes. And those outcomes tell us something about the power of choice to determine the narrative of our lives—what we live for and live by—and those choices define our identity. Abraham was a righteous man and Judas was a traitor; the first served God and the second was, despite his choice to do evil, co-opted by God to secure our salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Getting to this place, or level in dealing with Scripture is like reaching the mother lode in the mining of gold, or finding the aquifer when drilling for water! There are dry wells, wells which never found a source of water . . . and there are many mine shafts which followed a vein of gold but never reached the mother lode. Gal. 3:5-6 lay before me quite inert. I prayed for insight, for a breath of life in it and eventually it came to me, by route of Judas’ betrayal (an evil act birthed of his unbelief—he not only did not believe God he chose to betray the Son of God unto death). Most of us, I think, recoil at the idea that we might betray the Lord. Phew, at least I never did that! And, yet, the choice to not believe God, especially if you are, or claim to be a Christian/believer, is a betrayal—the treasonous action of a traitorous heart.

Have I betrayed Jesus through unbelief? I mean, have I betrayed him not as unto the cross—that has happened and my salvation was thereby secured—but by ceding ground to our enemies, the principalities and powers in league with Satan? Or the forces of evil embodied in my fellow human beings who openly sin against God and one another? Have I surrendered in the face of promised victory? Or, if that seems too strongly put, have I given up hope, and despaired of my confidence that right will win, and that truth and love and justice and life will conquer in the end? Is discouragement in the face of so much death and destruction, violence and viciousness—the stench of which is overwhelming, sickening and unhealthy—not understandable? Longfellow wrote the lyrics: “And in despair I bowed my head:

“There is no peace on earth,” I said, “for hate is strong and mocks the song Of peace on earth, goodwill to men.” v. 3 Is it illegitimate to harbor such feelings, such sentiments when the ceaseless drumbeat of fear and negativity is all we’re hearing? *My response is this: if that drumbeat is all you are hearing, switch the channel.*
Choose to listen to what God is saying!

God sent his angels to proclaim **Peace on earth, Goodwill to men with whom he is well pleased . . . I bring you good news of great joy which shall be to all mankind . . . for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.** Even Longfellow knew this. Verse 3 is followed by verse 4: Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: “God is not dead: nor doth he sleep; the wrong shall fail, the right prevail with peace on earth, good-will to men.” One could wish that Longfellow had not left the gospel message to pealing bells—true words would be better! And yet, building on this, friends, beyond what you choose to listen to still sits the question: do you believe God . . . or, do you not? Do you believe God, or will you hearken to the fear-mongering, lawlessness of the media, politicians and the press? Choose carefully, the consequences are both real, and one of them is grim.

I think it may be helpful to touch upon the nuanced language used by Paul here. The phrase **supplies the Spirit** or **provides you with the Spirit**, comes from the Greek, *epichoregon* and has two fields of meanings from classical Greek and Hellenistic Greek: they are 1. grant freely or 2. support, or help. And both meanings contribute something to our understanding of the Holy Spirit. The first echoes the sense of the graciousness of the gift of the Spirit (which God supplies, or provides) and then comes the subsidiary sense of the Holy Spirit as Paraclete one who comes along side, as a helper and assists the believer. So far so good, however **works miracles** differs significantly from **providing works of power**—which the translators have rendered “miracles.” I suppose that supernatural activities (**works of power**) might be less loaded language than miracles. **All miracles** are works of power, but not all **works of power** attain the status of the miraculous and could well absorb less stratospheric things like the power to perseverance in faith, endure hardship. Things more common and normalized than that widen the applicability of these verses in a very helpful manner. The distance between works of the law and works of power is lessened.

Recently, I put some winter grippers on a pair of work shoes—a sane thing to do given the icy slopes I deal with at home. And to my chagrin, I realized that I, in a typically male manner, had thrown the instructions away! I was overconfident that I could install them without the instructions. Okay, foolish. They taught me otherwise. I was humbled by those grippers. I actually installed the second pair of cleats upside down *and that was not really working.* Brain cramp!

Now, disclosing just how my mind works, I immediately thought of Abraham and wondered, “Just how did Abraham walk in the ways of the Lord before the instructions were ever published?” Seems a good question, no? My mind was grasping for some purchase, or grip on the ground. And then came a response,

Abraham walked by faith—he heard the word of the Lord which came to him on several occasions and, taking the Lord at His word, did what he was told to do. He walked by faith. That is precisely what Judas chose not to do. Judas walked treacherous in a world where treachery and the traitors who practice operate. They pay good money for those willing to be their accomplices.

Does God still operate that Abrahamic way? This would be great news for people who, in absence of possessing the Scriptures, are neither abandoned, nor neglected by God! *Of course they aren't. Yes he does.* Those who are called and respond by faith always have grace extended to them. Obedience has its rewards! Not that they have thrown the instructions away; no, they never had them in the first place!

One linguistic consequence of translating **works of power** as **miracles** is that power loses out. **The Kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power**, as Paul notes in 1 Cor. 4:20. And it is not a natural power meant here in Galatians, one dependent on a utilities company and a grid, or infrastructure. “When the preacher preaches in such a way that the Word is not fruitless but effective in the hearts of the hearers—then God gives His Spirit and performs miracles in their hearts.” (Luther, p. 130 P 3) I am uncertain where Luther’s limitation: “effective in their hearts” comes from. Therefore I would resist that interpretation because it puts the straitjacket of subjectivity on the verse which does appear to be sustainable on its own. Are “miracles in the heart” easier to defend, or maintain than more broad expression **works of power**? Perhaps, but I shall prefer Paul to Luther on this point. Paul is highlighting Abraham’s faith walk and is arguing for the objectivity of that walk in real time, and as duplicated in the actual lives of other believers. Surely that is the point because Paul follows with: **those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith.** (vv. 7-8)

I really like, however, where Luther goes with this verse, God has “made you to live holy lives . . . you have been changed from adulterers, wrathful, impatient and greedy people, enemies in fact, into generous, chaste, gentle and patient people who love your neighbors.” (also Luther, p. 130 P 3) You see, the nature of Christ, implanted in believers works a change of character by transforming their nature, their dispositions. These differences did not come about through observing the law *but were the fruit of the Spirit obtained through the preaching of the true gospel.*

From the preaching of a false gospel no such benefits would accrue, nor could they!

Did Abraham go through such a radical transformation as Luther outlines when he went from being a pagan, to becoming the first Jew? Should stress that Paul describes an almost identical transformation in 1 Cor. 6:9-11:

9 Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor [a]homosexuals, 10 nor thieves, nor *the* greedy, nor those habitually drunk, nor verbal abusers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and [b]in the Spirit of our God.

It is possible to read that into the text, I suppose; but it is not there explicitly, only by inference from places like 1 Cor. 6. Except, of course, this: the bible pointedly refers to him as righteous! But what is intriguing is that *Abraham was the beginning of a whole new religion*. He had no traditions to draw on! He received nothing from his father *everything started new with his God encounter, his call*. You and I encounter Abraham with a considerable backstory. All of the Genesis history! The records of creation, interactions with the first family, the decline of morality and goodness leading up to the catastrophe of the Flood. Now, if Moses, as I understand, is the transcriber of all that, then recall, Abraham never saw a scroll of it! What Moses transcribed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit then would complement what Abraham received through folktale, folk memory and the like.

Because there is only one world history, we can gather certain things as distributed amongst the pagan nations and their heathen religions—which are all degradations of the one, true, original religion lived out in Genesis.

And we mustn't forget the universal backdrop of spiritual warfare which began before creation and continues apace in our day . . . careening towards the last day and Christ's return. A single war executed on man, many fronts.

Something analogous to this “starting from scratch” happens, I think, on a personal and psychological level; when a person converts to faith, or becomes a believer. If the person has a world of experience, say, is an adult, there is a great clarification process to go through. We see connections because our “present” doesn't appear “tabula rasa.” Gradually “what God is up” to displaces, or writes over the script of our life story; this is a growth in awareness.

5 So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works [a]miracles among you, do it by works of [b]the Law, or by hearing [c]with faith?

So then. Paul is asking us to reflect on our personal history. **Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law?** Well, no, we didn't. We received it as a gift. We didn't earn it, merit it, or deserve it. We weren't given the gift of regeneration by works either. It was **hearing with faith**. (v. 2). One moment we were “seeing” but not “observing” and the next moment we were doing both. Something had changed in us, faith was catalyst to understanding. We didn't get it and then we did. Yes,

hearing with faith. There was a miracle that proceeded our rebirth, or resulted in our rebirth. It dawns on us that mere existence, physical and corporeal isn't all there is . . . that materialism cannot account for us, or for everything. Maybe some things. It dawns on us that we are spiritual beings having a body experience. *And it isn't a mind trick, an illusion.* I know there are some religions that teach that being and existence are illusory, works of fiction. But those who think that way and indistinguishable from those are not **hearing with faith.**

I particularly like the phrasing **does he who provides you with the Spirit** because it establishes that our life, or the Spirit within us, is a provision made by God. God does this. And the Spirit that works **miracles**, or causes **works of power *signifies an agency and activity.*** Everyone who **hears with faith**, who now **sees and observes** knows this; it is reality, both their reality and reality itself.

We get to **believe God as Abraham believed.** And we will be reckoned **righteous** in just the same manner. Because by the grace of God faith still saves us to the uttermost.

Amen