

The Gospel and Emotional Health

The Sanctification Gap: Models for Change

Galatians 3.1-5; Ephesians 1.15-23, 3.14-21

(Gal. 3) You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? ² This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? ³ Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? ⁴ Did you suffer so many things in vain-- if indeed it was in vain? ⁵ So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?

(Eph. 1) For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints, ¹⁶ do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers; ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. ¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might ²⁰ which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²² And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

(Eph. 3) For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, ¹⁶ that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. ²⁰ Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, ²¹ to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

We're looking at the basic teaching of Christianity, the Gospel, and how it relates to emotional health.

Last week we looked at the complicated causes and complicated cures of what's being called a public health crisis of emotional breakdown. Here's a headline from a national media outlet on Tuesday of this past week (May 2, 2023; CNN online): "US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released an advisory Tuesday addressing the 'epidemic of loneliness and isolation' affecting the country and laying out a framework for a 'National Strategy to Advance Social Connection.'"

OUR goal is to probe *the emotional health of the Church*. Many professing believers in Jesus Christ are apparently spiritually mature but experience a kind of "sanctification gap" * when it comes to emotional

maturity. We may, for instance, be very clear that we're made right with God by GRACE but when it comes to relating to non-Christian people we may ACT and SPEAK as if WE are good with God because we ARE good. Church-people may angrily complain about the rotten ways of the world, the bad changes in our society and even ask, "*What is WRONG with people?!*" People who've been members of churches for decades never consider areas of their own growth in this area of emotions i.e., what moves us inwardly as we relate to people outwardly?

Today, we address again this *sanctification gap* – how we're declared righteous but don't always act, speak, think or feel righteously. When we think about sanctification or progress in the spiritual life – *how do we go about it i.e., how to make spiritual/moral improvements to our character?* How do we turn what God says about us in Christ (i.e., that we're NOT guilty and that we're righteous in God's sight – "saints") how do we turn God's declaration of righteousness into actual, practical character change?

In these sections written by St Paul, we see:

- 1) The "Common-Sense", Acceptable Way of Progress
- 2) The Counterintuitive, AcceptING Way of Progress

Ronaldo, Phil and I recently listened to a lecture, by Simeon Zahl (professor at Oxford University), on models of change. Businesses have models or theories of change, ways management expect or help their employees to change the corporate culture. Individuals have theories or models of change. If you want to lose weight, get in shape, drop a habit or adopt a new habit, *what do you rely on to facilitate change?* It could be some form of the "*carrot or stick*" – ways you reward or punish yourself into changing.

And, of course, churches have theories or models of change. Some are sacramental; that by being baptized (once) and by celebrating Holy Communion (repeatedly), members... gradually change. Other churches are more informational; a lot of emphasis on education, doctrinal teaching, classes – "*IF we can get the right information into our heads then our hearts and desires and motivations and finally our thoughts, words and deeds will... improve.*"

Another theory of change in some churches is worship – singing and getting lost in wonder over who God is – that's how people change/improve. There's certainly truth in each of these approaches and most churches probably employ some combination of models in their attempts to usher people into spiritual growth and into Christlikeness.

Before we look at the first passage where Paul speaks to the issues of how the spiritual life is "begun" and how it's completed or "perfected" (Gal 3.3) We should say something about the writer and about the impact of this short document, *St Paul's Letter to the Churches of Galatia*.

If we gauged the impact that thinkers have had on the world, we'd have to say that St Paul is probably in the top five most influential human beings who ever lived. And THIS, of all his writings, is the root of his thinking. And here, in the middle, he says, "*THIS is the only thing I want to find out from you...*" In other words, this is the bottom-line, the core of the core, the root of the radical thinking of one of the most significant thinkers in human history. If we want to GET Christianity – it's HERE ("the ONLY thing")!

In the first passage, the Apostle Paul is incensed with this network of young churches in Northern Turkey because they're attempting to be "perfected" (v.3) in a way that appears to them to be...normal...what you'd expect... a common-sense conventional, acceptable approach to improvement. We could call it: *"growth by getting with the program"*.

The way it works is that a person hears the Good News of Jesus Christ and believes that news, that in Jesus Christ, God came to us and *on behalf of everyone desperate enough to believe it*, God, in Jesus Christ lived the beautiful, human life of flawless love. He lived the life I was required to live and died the death I deserved to die. He fulfilled the agreement between God and man. He did that for ME!... And it's not just "wish-fulfillment" or religious delusion: He rose from the dead, proving that He was the Messiah, the Savior of sinners, the King of Creation, the acceptable Sacrifice, the Head of the Church.

The Galatians heard that message; Christ was publicly portrayed to them as crucified (3.1) for the sins of everyone who believes, and THEY BELIEVED! And when they simply believed/received that message, God, the Holy Spirit Himself, came into their lives. They received the Holy Spirit and He even did miracles among them... NOT because THEY'D been good people who obeyed God's words (because they weren't good) but because of God's grace, God's gift to the undeserving. They didn't DESERVE – they simply received what Jesus Christ deserved. "This is ON Me!" said Jesus and it was settled.

And then...to move ahead into this lovely new life of reconciliation and intimacy with God they said, "Well, let's get with the program! Let's prove to God, to others and to ourselves that we deserve this... that we're obedient. That we're GOOD PEOPLE who do what God commands and that's why God chose US. Let's do religious stuff, undergo rituals, eat religious foods, wear religious clothing and proclaim to the world... that we ARE *where we ARE today* because WE TRY HARDER THAN THEY DO!

And Paul replies, "Someone has cast a spell on you! You're not even listening to yourselves because if you were then you'd see how senseless and absurd you sound!"

But Paul... we may not be brilliant like you...but we do understand how religion works... We're simply using common sense and doing what we've always known to be the acceptable response to religion. We've learned this from YOU: that God helps those who help themselves!"

And Paul is like, "HUH?! ... YOU DID NOT LEARN THAT FROM ME! ... Please, think back to the start! Let me put this as directly and clearly as I know how: *This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?* (Gal. 3.2) You were rewarded for what Jesus Christ did and you GOT that reward by hearing and believing. It wasn't because you did any works of the Law or any obedience on YOUR part – you received, salvation, the Spirit, forgiveness, right standing before God as a gift based on Jesus Christ's obedience NOT your own... RIGHT?!"

Well... yes... of course. It was by grace received by faith... THAT'S CRYSTAL CLEAR, Paul! But we're just trying to... you know, get with the program... Again, we're not scholars like YOU are...but we know how religion works."

And Paul is saying, “Yeah... but THIS isn’t religion in that sense. The Gospel isn’t a program for US to do – it’s an accomplishment for Jesus Christ to do ... AND HE DID! Jesus paid it all! He finished the program and *“tis mine but to believe, to recognize His work of love and Christ receive”* You don’t achieve it – you receive it. If there’s a program here: it’s receiving, believing, relying, depending, leaning, resting and receiving – that’s how you started; that’s how you move ahead.”

“Well, I don’t know why you’re getting all excited, Paul. We’re just trying to do our part. You can’t be mad at us for trying our best...it’s just common sense... it’s just what all religions promote as the acceptable way of improvement, the basic principles of this world.”

So... if Christianity doesn’t move forward by OUR obedience – if we did NOT *receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, but by hearing with faith* – what does that look like in practice? Do we just keep on... what... receiving the Spirit by hearing with faith? What kind of religion IS this?

And to answer this question, let me put another question: How would YOU pray for a friend who had just become a Christian? *What would YOU see as the most important steps in that new believer’s progress, improvement, sanctification, growth toward spiritual maturity?* OR let me put it a slightly different way: IF you could sit down with Jesus Christ’s apostle, Paul, for a short counseling session – and could ask him what YOU should do to move forward in your walk with God... and could then ask him to pray for you FOR WHAT would he pray?

Well, the second two paragraphs are EXACTLY THAT – Paul hears that these people in Ephesus believed the Gospel and he saw in them an immediate evidence that they actually DID believe because they immediately connected to and had love for other Christians (this apparently happens when someone believes the Gospel – they feel connected and in love with other Christians whom they may not even know!) and WHEN Paul prays for these young Christians the basic gist of Paul’s prayer is that they FEEL the love of God as it is expressed in Jesus Christ.

You know... but you don’t know. You believe but you don’t believe. You experience the love of God but you’re NOT FEELING the love of God. You know Jesus Christ was put to shame for you, was publicly portrayed as crucified (Gal 3.1) for you but it’s NOT arresting you... it doesn’t make you cry like it did at first.

I’m not going to give these paragraphs the close attention they deserve but look at a few little sections. Paul begins this two-part prayer: *“that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him”* (Eph. 1.17) He uses a word for knowledge that’s like hyper-knowledge (ἐπιγινώσκω); we could think of it as experiential knowledge or a *knowing that emotionally moves you*. A deep insight that comes NOT simply from learning but Spirit-taught wisdom and revelation – NOT that you’re going to hear a voice from beyond but that what you know catches fire.

Or look at v. 18, “That the eyes of your heart be enlightened so that you will know – literally “see” the hope of God’s calling.” See, what you first believed, you now believe again. Looking for God to make it more real. And so the prayer goes, (in the second part – Ephesians CH 3, v 17) “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...”

And (next verse – v. 18) *“that you may be able to comprehend (same force as our word “GET” – that you’d GET it!) that you comprehend/GET the breadth and length and height and depth i.e., to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.”* (Eph. 3.18-19)

To KNOW something that surpasses knowledge... What does that mean? It’s counterintuitive – the very wording is ... beyond knowing. Could it mean... feeling? Something beyond knowing but a deeper, experiential, re-encounter with that first sense of relief from your bad record or failings... A sense of honey on the tongue (not simply an awareness of the different types of honey or the viscosity/thickness or origin of the honey) but to TASTE.

This is the way we grow. And often the door through which this experiential, feeling or sense that I AM ACTUALLY KNOWN BY GOD, He sees all that’s worst about me and loves me anyway...and even likes me... and delights in me even though I am sinful beyond what I know and HE IS HOLY beyond what I can imagine... often the light that dazzles the eyes of my heart enters into my soul through cracks caused by suffering, by fear, by failure, by regret, by need... sometimes by pleasure and joy... When high and low events and occurrences find me calling upon God because He is the only One who can help and who knows the depths of my guilt, my sin, my grief and despair; only He knows that when I saw that “bok choy” coming out of the ground in my garden or a sunrise or my grandchild take her first steps... when my soul has been pierced by pleasure or pain and I cry out/sing** ... and then I see the love of God anew; that’s when growth takes place.

That’s when, once again and now with fresh intensity and power, I know whom I have believed. I sense that He actually loved me to death... AND, I do it... most often with YOU. It’s a communal experience, done in partnership ...and so Paul ends this prayer on the counterintuitive accepting path of growth, pointing us to the wonder of Christ the Head of the Church, and the Church, Christ’s Body:

“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen”. (Eph. 3.20-21)

*This phrase is used by Richard Lovelace in his outstanding book, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (CH 7)

** Sometimes a light surprises/The Christian while he sings/It is the Lord who rises/With healing in His wings/When comforts are declining/He grants the soul again/A season of clear shining/To cheer it after rain. (William Cowper, 1779)

QUOTES:

Love is a feeling or emotion of union and delight and desire to be near to the object loved. So long as the Father is seen as harsh, judging and condemning, the soul is filled with fear and dread every time it comes to him. So,

in scripture we read of sinners fleeing and hiding from him. But when God, who is the Father, is seen as a father, filled with love, the soul is filled with love to God in return. This is, in faith, the ground of all acceptable obedience...

You must, then, so believe as to receive the love of the Father. You do not hold communion with God in anything until you receive it by faith. You need to believe that God loves you, that his heart is filled with love to you and accept his word for it. You will never experience the sweetness of his love until you receive it. **You must, then, continually remind yourself that God loves you and embraces you with his free eternal love. When the Lord is, by his Word, presented as a Father who loves you, then think about it and accept it.** Then embrace him by faith and let your heart be filled with his love. Set your whole heart to receive his love and let your heart be bound with the cords of this love.

– John Owen (1616-1683) *Communion with God* (abridged and modernized by R.J.K. Law, 1991; pp 17, 30; emphasis added)

... the heart of Christian ministry is the facilitation of an emotional encounter with the God revealed in Jesus. I say this without condition or reservation. If you are not successfully engaging with people's feelings and desires, with their anxieties, their loves, and their pain, then you are just playing a game with Christian words; you are not doing ministry. The intransigence of the human heart is the fundamental problem of Christian ministry. The Spirit of God traffics in emotion and desire.

– Simeon Zahl: "The Cure of Souls: Theory of Change in Christian Ministry" (an essay presented at the 2022 Mockingbird Conference, New York, NY)