

Spirit-Filled Living Series

The Distorted Christian Life (Gal. 3:1-5)

By
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At A Glance:

- I. Introduction**
- II. Remember How the Christian Life Began**
- III. Choose Our Christian Life Course Carefully**
- IV. Realize the Spirit is Needed for Growth**
- V. Conclusion**

These sermon study notes are designed to be a tool used after listening to the sermon. This resource is a guide to help deepen understanding regarding the Scriptures and ideas presented in the sermon. Those who use these study notes are encouraged to look up, read through, and think about Scripture references in this guide. There is more information in these notes than what is presented in the sermon. These study notes are designed to be used as an independent study tool to help the formation of Biblical convictions, character, and conduct.

The Distorted Christian Life

I. Introduction

A. Illustration: Hospital Horror

1. Many times, the most difficult part of visiting someone in the hospital is finding them. It was a hospital I hadn't been to for a while. Not only was I out of practice with the building, but the person was also in a specialized ICU that I had not been to before.
2. Normally, when I enter the hospital, I stop at the desk by the main entrance and get the person's room number and, if necessary, some directions. This time, no one was at the desk, and I already knew the person I was visiting was in the ICU. I paused at the desk, waited for a moment, and saw no one was coming, so I continued on my own. I thought if I paid careful attention, I'd be able to follow the signs.
3. As I got to the end of the first hallway, I looked at the group of signs on the wall pointing in various directions. The ICU I needed wasn't listed anywhere. I looked down each hallway and picked the direction I thought would lead to more of a main part of the building. I didn't find what I needed. I tried a different level. No luck.
4. Eventually, I saw a sign that pointed to the ICU I needed, but I was on the wrong floor. Not taking the chance of getting turned around in an elevator, I walked up several flights of stairs. I got to the ICU the person was supposed to be in, and I was informed they weren't there. Thankfully, a nurse directed me to another ICU and walked me there so I didn't get lost again.

B. We are all probably familiar with getting lost. Sometimes even our GPS doesn't get it right! When we get lost, we lose our bearings and don't know how to get to our desired destination. Did you know this can happen in the Christian life as well? People can get lost spiritually. Paul is trying to give the lost disciples of Galatians some directions so they can get back on the right path toward their destination. While these disciples started the Christian life on the right course, they had wandered into the weeds by being taken in by a false teaching.

C. We are warned to be careful about how we pursue the Christian life in Galatians 3:1-5. It is easy for disciples to drift off course in unhealthy ways as we are pursuing Jesus. In general, there are two major courses a person can use to relate to God. One of those courses is God's way, while the other one is not. One is the genuine Christian life, while the other is a distorted version of the Christian life. Some people can even begin following Jesus the right way and, if they are not careful, end up drifting into the ditch of the distorted Christian life. The disciples in Galatians are being encouraged by Paul to think carefully about how they are living their Christian life and pay attention to make sure they are in the correct lane.

II. Remember How the Christ Life Began

A. God communicates an accurate understanding of reality—truth spoken in His word—but He also interacts with those who respond to the truth in the desired way. Those who are connected to Jesus have real experiences of God working in their life.¹ Christianity is not only an

¹ Eph. 4:20-23

acceptance of truth in an academic way—giving intellectual consent to what is said. Christianity is also a living, interactive relationship with God through which God works in and through us. Anyone who thinks Christianity is irrelevant hasn't experienced the real presence of the Spirit within them. The impact of Jesus is deeply personal and profound.

- B. When the personal, transformative nature of Christianity is missing, a common problem is striving to live the type of life described in the word of God by our own abilities. This distorted version of the Christian life happens when people get confused about how God works in our lives. The Galatian disciples are starting to get off course in their Christian life, so Paul directs their attention back to what they have already experienced with Jesus. Paul is coming alongside these followers of Jesus to help them think more clearly about the true nature of the Christian life, since these disciples are not able or willing to do it on their own.
- C. He is what Paul tells the churches:
 - ¹ 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 works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? (Gal. 3:1-2)
- D. Paul calls these disciples foolish two times (“You foolish Galatians”, v. 1 and “Are you so foolish?”, v. 3). Paul is not insulting them through name calling; he is describing how these disciples are acting.² Paul is trying to warn these disciples and open their eyes to the fact that they are on a dangerous spiritual course. The Galatian disciples are not doing a very good job thinking carefully or clearly about spiritual topics. Their confusion is causing them to drift toward a spiritually destructive path. To be foolish is to be mindless in the sense of not being marked by the use of reason.³ Failing to think correctly, these disciples are failing to comprehend the true nature of the genuine Christian life, which is why they are listening to a false teaching being communicated within the church by false teachers. Learning to think reasonably and logically is an important part of the Christian life (1 Cor. 13:11, 14:20, Phil. 1:9-11, Col 1:9-10, 3:10, 2 Thess. 2:10, Philem. 6, Mt. 22:37, Mk. 12:24, Lk. 12:54-57, Jn. 7:24, Ps. 119:99).⁴
- E. To correct this mental mistake and to encourage a more logical approach to the Christian life, Paul wants these disciples to look back over their shoulder and remember where they have come from; how their journey with Jesus started. (“This is the only thing I want to find out from you”, v. 2). He draws their attention to their first exposure to Jesus and the true gospel message—the topic of conversation (“Having begun by the Spirit”, v. 3). Every parent remembers and enjoys their children’s first steps. These disciples are being asked to remember their first baby steps in spiritual life.⁵ Paul is using what these disciples already know and have experienced to move them back toward a spiritually healthy course for their Christian life.

² A close parallel with Luke 24:25

³ Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Galatians 3:1 and 3:3

⁴ Jesus is the greatest example of loving God with our mind and models the proper use of reason/logic. His wisdom was supernaturally empowered by the Spirit (Isa. 11:1-4). Jesus also promised that this type of wisdom would be made available to His disciples (Lk. 21:12-15).

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- F. As these disciples are thinking about their experience of Jesus, Paul asks them an important question (“This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit...”, v. 2). The genuine Christian life begins the moment a person receives the Holy Spirit.⁶ To receive means to get something or come into possession.⁷ When this happens, the Spirit begins putting spiritual life in the soul of the person who has trusted Jesus. Paul asks a question about how these disciples initially experienced the Holy Spirit. What happened? When did these disciples receive the Holy Spirit? What did they do to receive the Spirit? What were the disciples doing when they first experienced the Holy Spirit? How was the Holy Spirit received?
- G. The implied and assumed answer to the question is that these disciples initially received the Holy Spirit for the first time by listening to the true gospel preached by Paul with an acceptance and attitude of trust in what they heard—by faith (“hearing with faith”, v. 2). Everyone receives the Holy Spirit after hearing the message about Jesus and accepting it by trusting the message that is heard—following the example of Abraham (Gal. 3:6-7). Those who hear the message of God and respond positively to it receive the Holy Spirit.⁸ Hearing is faithful receptivity through being attentive to the word of God, including both a trust in the content (along with God who gives it) and a disposition to obey what is heard.⁹ This act of God in salvation is called regeneration—the moment the Spirit of God makes a person spiritually alive.
- H. Why does Paul immediately focus on the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life? Because a person who has the Holy Spirit is right with God and will be living the way God wants, eventually. The Holy Spirit is the definitive way to tell if a person is right with God as a child of God (Rm. 8:9, 1 Cor. 2:14). If the Galatian disciples have experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit in their life (and Paul presents an argument to demonstrate the fact), then they don’t need anything else as the false teachers are claiming to live the type of life that is pleasing to God. All that is needed is the Holy Spirit.
- I. Paul explains in more detail what he means by beginning the Christian life in a portion of chapter five:
- ⁷ You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? ⁸ This persuasion *did not come* from Him who calls you. ⁹ A little leaven leavens the whole lump of *dough*. ¹⁰ I have confidence in you in the Lord, that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you will bear the punishment, whoever he is. (Gal. 5:7-10)
- J. The Galatian disciples had been on the right course for their Christian life (“You were running well,” v. 7). These followers of Jesus responded the way they should have when they heard the message of Jesus, and their first steps toward Jesus were correct. They were living the Christian life effectively by obeying the truth of the word of God. They were living in faith. All this was the result of them having the right perspective (“I have confidence in you in the Lord, that you will adopt no other view”, v. 10). These disciples started with the right view that led to their spiritual health.

⁶ Gal. 4:4-6, Rm. 1:16, 2 Cor. 5:17, Tiit. 3:5 (See also Jn. 3:3-8, Jas. 1:18, 1 Jn. 5:1, 1 Pet. 1:23, Dt. 30:6, Jer. 31:33-34, Ezek. 11:19-20)

⁷ Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Galatians 3:2 “did you receive”

⁸ Paul described the beginning of the Christian life in more detail in Ephesians 1:13-14. He explains more in 1 Thessalonians 2:13. This description is experienced by the early church in Acts 2:36-41 and Acts 10:44-48.

⁹ Douglas J. Moo, [Galatians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 183.

- K. Unfortunately, all this began to change when they heard a false message. The Galatian disciples are starting to change their course toward a spiritually unhealthy way of pursuing the Christian life that is not aligned with the truth. They are starting to drift toward a distorted Christian life. The problem started when false teachers came into the church and convinced these disciples a distorted view of the Christian life was better than the perspective they had learned from Paul (“the one who is disturbing you”, v. 10). We know these are false teachers who were using deceptive tactics (Gal. 2:4). These disciples had heard a distorted gospel and started to move toward a distorted Christian life as a result. Just because a person starts strong in the Christian life doesn’t mean that’s how they will continue or how they will finish. There is no cruise control for the Christian life.
- L. Our life with God begins as we listen to the true gospel and we understand the importance and relevance of what Jesus has done on the cross for us personally. This realization motivates us to respond in a way that is pleasing to God. We repent (having a change of mindset) and believe (trust in the content of what is heard and the person of Jesus). When we respond to our own guilt and failures related to God, we admit our need and reach out to Jesus to forgive us. This heart posture toward Jesus causes the Spirit of God to bring spiritual life into our soul.
- M. Have you ever experienced such a moment? While listening to the message of Jesus, were you brought to a point where you admitted your moral failings toward God and asked Jesus to forgive you and remove the weight and burden of a guilty conscience? When faith occurs through the communication of the true gospel, there is an internal realization and acknowledgement of our spiritual need for Jesus. A person realizes that their relationship with God is broken and they are not the type of person God requires them to be to be (in right relationship with Him). There is also an understanding that I can’t fix what is broken. God’s help, through Jesus, is needed to be restored to a right relationship with God and to be empowered to grow into the type of person that is pleasing to God. When a person’s attitude toward God is like this, God sees it and responds by giving us His Spirit in our hearts. When we have an attitude of trust toward Jesus, accept His message as truth, and have a change of mindset as a result we have expressed faith by hearing the gospel.

III. Choose Our Christian Life Course Carefully

- A. After getting these disciples to think about how the Christian life began, they are confronted with a choice. There are two ways to pursue the Christian life. One option is the genuine Christian life that is the natural outcome of the true gospel. The other option is a distorted version of the Christian life that follows naturally from a distorted gospel. These two courses related to the Christian life are put side by side by Paul and contrasted from one another. They are not compatible, and every person will be one of these two courses.
- B. Here are the two courses followed for the Christian life:
 - ² This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? (Gal. 3:2)
- C. The options are laid out for these disciples, the Christian life will be pursued and lived according to human effort or according to reliance on God (“by works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?”, v. 2). These two options are clearly opposed to one another and are not compatible.

Every person must choose one or the other; we can't have both. Paul clarifies the incapability of these two courses when he says, "the Law is not of faith" (Gal. 3:11-12). For Paul, there is a choice to be made here about how a person is going to live for God: either by our own effort or by continuing to rely on God.

- D. This contrast is so important that Paul repeats it for emphasis:

⁵ So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? (Gal. 3:5)

- E. Paul explains that these two approaches to the Christian life are two different ways of life. Those who require the writings of Moses to be part of the Christian life are promoting a specific type of lifestyle connected to Jesus. A person who lives by Jewish laws are required to perform them (Gal. 3:12).¹⁰ On the other side is a different type of lifestyle. The person whom God makes right with Him—justified so they become righteous—will live by faith (Gal. 3:11).¹¹ Therefore, every person will have to decide whether they are going to live by the law or live by faith. Each option is different and distinct, "the Law is not of faith" (Gal. 3:12). A choice must be made.
- F. The first course a person can choose for the Christian life is the distorted version of the Christian life ("by works of the Law"). This refers to everything that is required by the Law of Moses—the first five books of the Old Testament. More broadly, works of the Law can be understood as our independent reliance on one's own accomplishments against the attitude of dependence on and submission to the Holy Spirit.¹² Paul uses the idea of "works of the law" interchangeably with "by the flesh" (Gal. 3:3). Human effort to obtain or maintain a right relationship with God unaided by God is what Paul intends by the idea of works of the Law.¹³
- G. The second course is the genuine Christian life ("by hearing with faith", v. 2). Paul uses the idea of "by hearing with faith" interchangeably with "by the Spirit" (Gal. 3:3). Faith understands that the Spirit of God is the one who supplies us with spiritual life, works in us to produce that which is pleasing to God, and continues that work our entire lives (Rm. 8:11, Phil. 1:6, 2:12-13). Living by faith is an attitude that trusts God, His wisdom, His perspective, and His word above our own thoughts, feelings, and desires. Faith is defined throughout this letter as trust in Jesus as the Son of God, being assured of Jesus' love for us as a child of God, and His rescue of us through the cross (Gal. 2:20). As previously stated, to live by faith is to operate in life with a focus on Jesus and maintain a commitment to Jesus while we continue to trust Him moment by moment. The true gospel continues to impact and influence the person who lives by faith.
- H. Not only is this contrast between human effort and reliance on God's help emphasized, so, too, is the Holy Spirit's role in the genuine Christian life. Paul refers to the Holy Spirit three times in this portion of Scripture ("receive the Spirit", v. 2, "having begun by the Spirit", v. 3, and "who provides you with the Spirit", v. 5). The influence and activity of the Holy Spirit is central to Paul's understanding of the genuine Christian life. Human effort to mimic and replace the role

¹⁰ Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 27:26 and Leviticus 18:5 to prove his point from Scripture.

¹¹ Paul quotes from Habakuk 2:4

¹² Timothy George, *Galatians*, vol. 30, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 212.

¹³ Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, vol. 41, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1990), 103.

of the Spirit is at the center of the distorted Christian life. We need the Spirit to come into us and empower us for spiritual life, we need the Spirit to get us moving toward God, and we need the Spirit to give us access to the resources of God to experience the genuine Christian life. Authentic spiritual life is saturated with the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit. Receiving the Holy Spirit is THE MARK that signifies a person belongs to the people of God.¹⁴

- I. How do you view your own moral goodness? The answer we give will significantly impact how we approach the Christian life and the way we relate to God. Whether we are convinced we are morally and spiritually broken or not will become evident in how we approach the Christian life. Some people try to live the Christian life as if they can do it on their own. Through determination, willpower, and discipline, they will do all that God wants them to do. Those who think they are good enough on their own to be the person God wants them to be will pursue the Christian life by their own effort (what Paul calls works of the Law). Their Christian life mentality is always, “I will do better next time.” These people think they are a good person who does what God wants most of the time.
- J. Those who think of themselves as not good enough will pursue the Christian life by relying on God’s help to become the person He wants them to be (what Paul calls by faith). They will be constantly depending on God for help. They understand through their own experience that they can’t do what God tells them to do in His word. They rely on God working in them to change them into the person He wants them to be. These people are convinced they are broken at their core, and they only do what God wants as He empowers them. Our view of our own sinfulness will determine whether we choose to live a genuine Christian life or a distorted version of it.

IV. Realize the Spirit is Needed for Growth

- A. Paul switches his focus in the middle of this passage and is no longer focusing on the beginning of the Christian life. He is now, essentially, asking the question, “How does a person continue in and maintain a genuine Christian life?” Focus has shifted from the beginning of the Christian life, which these disciples had experienced, to the continued maintaining of the Christian life, which these disciples are getting off track on and not experiencing the way they should.
- B. Paul asks more question to get these disciples thinking about the nature of the Christian life:

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 works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? (Gal. 3:3-5)
- C. Now in view is the way a person progresses in the Christian life and maintains their right relationship with God (“are you now being perfected by the flesh?”, v. 3). We are not talking about the beginning of the Christian life anymore; now we are talking about what happens to a person who has been following Jesus for a while—past the initial first few steps.¹⁵ The latter

¹⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, [Galatians](#), Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 178.

¹⁵ Trying to earn a right relationship with God through human effort is called legalism. Trying to maintain and continue a right relationship with God through human effort is called nomism. Both are rejected by Paul.

part of the Christian life is how a person is completing or reaching the intended goal of the Christian life—how a person makes progress and moves forward.¹⁶ Paul uses the term “perfected” to refer to spiritual maturity as the culmination of the activity of God in a person’s life. Paul is essentially asking the rhetorical question: How is a person made spiritually mature in the Christian life? He is now speaking of how a person grows spiritually—sanctification.

- D. Paul already made the point that the genuine Christian life began by receiving the Spirit through an attitude of trust in Jesus while hearing the message of Jesus. Now he makes the point that the Christian life continues in the same manner that it began. He asks a secondary question related to how God is working in their life to demonstrate the point even further (“does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you”, v. 5). As the Christian life continues, how does God work? He works in the same way that the Christian life is continued: by faith and the Spirit. Once again, he is assuming and arguing for the answer: through faith and the work of the Holy Spirit. His answer is provided (“by hearing with faith”, v 5).
- E. Those who want to attempt to please God through their own human effort to obey the word of God are cursed. Paul quotes Deuteronomy 27:26 to make this point:

¹⁰ For all who are of works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all the things written in the book of the law, to do them.” ¹¹ Now, that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, “the righteous one will live by faith.” (Gal. 3:10-11)
- F. The key principle being emphasized by Paul is the Christian life has a unifying principle of operation—by faith and the Spirit working. There is one consistent course.¹⁷ Through faith, the Holy Spirit works in the life of a disciple. This is the genuine Christian life. Following Abraham’s example, those living an authentic lifestyle of connection with God hear the word of God and trust what God’s word tells them—being a child of those who receive the promises of God (Gal. 3:6). The definition of faith Paul assumes throughout Galatians is summed up as an attitude of trust in Jesus and what He accomplished by His death and resurrection (Gal. 2:20). The genuine Christian life is lived by this faith in the enabling power of the Holy Spirit which is why every disciple must “sow to the Spirit” to grow (Gal. 6:8), rather than grieving (Eph. 4:30) or resisting Him (Ac. 7:51). Apart from Jesus we can do nothing that is spiritually productive (Jn. 15:5). Anyone who does not have and is not developing an attitude of trust in God will not be growing in the genuine Christian life, even if they attempt to obey the word of God through their own effort. Growing in affection, reliance, and trust in God is how the Christian life moves forward.
- G. Like these Galatian disciples, it is so easy to begin the Christian life well. We hear the message of Jesus and accept it as the truth. We have disobeyed God, and Jesus, as the perfect human and representative of God, can forgive us for all our failures toward God. We begin following Jesus joyfully, accepting the benefits God generously and graciously gives to us. We start the

¹⁶ Richard N. Longenecker, [Galatians](#), vol. 41, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1990), 103, Ronald Y. K. Fung, [The Epistle to the Galatians](#), The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 134.

¹⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, [Galatians](#), Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 184–185.

Christian life by faith and are given the presence of the Holy Spirit to help us live this new spiritual life.

- H. However, along the way, we start to believe that if we work hard enough, we can become the type of person God wants us to be by our own effort. We think the harder we try and work, the more we will grow spiritually. We start to believe we have the resources in ourselves to live obediently to the word of God. Yes, we do need to put diligent effort into our relationship with God, but we must also realize that God is the One who works in us so that we can respond to Him with our own effort. Dependence on God comes first. Our effort is a response to what God has done in us. All our effort invested into growing spiritually and living obediently to God is the result of God working in us. We didn't create the progress; the Spirit of God in us created the forward movement.
- I. If we drift into a distorted version of the Christian life, the way the Galatians are, we cut God out of the equation and try to live the Christian life under our own human ability—and we think we can be successful on our own. Spending time with God can even be pushed to the side as irrelevant because I can be busy doing what God wants me to do. Why pray and ask God for something when we can make it happen ourselves?

V. Conclusion

- A. Progression and effectiveness in the Christian life can only happen when we encourage the Holy Spirit's activity in our lives by deepening our trust in Jesus. The more openly we allow and encourage the activity of the Spirit in us, the more the genuine Christian life will flourish.
- B. Keep your eyes open and be careful to be on the lookout for your tendency to drift toward self-reliance in the Christian life. The more you depend on yourself, the less effective you will be in moving forward in your Jesus journey.