

"Living the Way We Began"

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Parkdale Community Church
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INTRO: Before we hear from Galatians this morning, let me frame why Paul sounds a little intense in what we're about to read. Paul isn't writing to strangers. He's writing to people he loves. This is a church he planted, people he knows by name, people whose faith once brought him deep joy. And now he's worried – not because they've abandoned Jesus, but because something subtle has shifted in how they're living their faith.

The church in Galatia started with trust, with relief, with gratitude – and somewhere along the way, faith began to feel heavier, more anxious, more complicated. So when Paul asks his questions here, he's not scolding. He's diagnosing. He's trying to wake them up before they start carrying burdens they were never meant to carry. Listen for that tone as we hear this passage – not condemnation, but concern; not anger, but urgency. Listen now to God's Word...

GALATIANS 3:1–14 (NIV)

3 You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. **2** I 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? **3** Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?^a **4** Have you experienced^b so much in vain—if it really was in vain? **5** So 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? **6** So also Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

7 Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham.⁸ Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.”⁹ So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

10 For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.”¹⁰ **11** Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because “the righteous will live by faith.”¹¹ **12** The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, it says, “The person who does these things will live by them.”¹² **13** Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.”¹³ **14** He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.

*May God bless to our hearts this reading from God's Word;
and to God be the glory forever. Amen.*

1. When Faith Starts Feeling Heavy (Galatians 3:1–3)

Let me start with a simple observation – and I think most of us will recognize it pretty quickly. If not immediately, then uncomfortably soon. 😞 Very few people walk away from faith all at once – most of the time, what happens isn't rebellion, it's **drift**. Quiet drift. Subtle drift. The kind that sneaks up on you while you're still doing all the right things. You're still showing up. Still praying. Still serving. Still trying to be faithful. From the outside, honestly, you look great. Nothing looks obviously wrong.

But somewhere along the way, faith starts to feel heavier than it used to. More stressful. More fragile. Less like good news and more like a performance review – and not the encouraging kind. Paul is writing to people exactly in that place. These are people who love Jesus, people whose faith once brought Paul deep joy. And when he asks his question, it sounds sharp at first, but it isn't meant to wound. It's meant to wake them up.

"Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" That word "foolish" can land a little hard for us. But Paul isn't calling them stupid. He's asking, "How did this happen? How did you get here?" Because what's gone wrong isn't their belief. It's their process.

They didn't stop trusting Jesus. They didn't reject grace. They didn't walk away from faith. They just slowly changed how they thought growth works. They started by trusting God – and then tried to finish by managing themselves. And honestly... if that doesn't feel familiar, you're either having a very good week – or you're not being totally honest with yourself yet.

Most of us don't wake up one morning and think, *You know what, today feels like a great day to start earning God's approval*. That would at least be obvious. It's much subtler than that. It shows up as pressure. As anxiety. As the sense that your spiritual life is always just one mistake away from falling apart.

You start asking questions like: *Am I doing enough? Am I disciplined enough? Am I faithful enough?* Before long, faith isn't something you receive anymore. It's something you maintain. Here's the irony – and it's an awkward one. This kind of drift often happens to the most responsible people in the room. The ones who care deeply. The ones who want to obey. The ones who really don't want to mess this up.

In Galatians 3, Paul doesn't yell. He diagnoses. Which, if you've ever been on the receiving end of a real diagnosis, you know that can actually be more unsettling. In effect, he's saying, "You began by receiving. Why are you trying to continue by achieving?" Because once faith shifts from dependence to performance, it doesn't make us holier. It makes us tired. And usually, it makes us a little less gracious too – not just with ourselves, but with the people closest to us.

When faith becomes pressure, that pressure doesn't stay contained. It spills outward. We start expecting spouses, children, friends, even fellow church members to help us feel justified. To validate us. To live up to the standards we're struggling to meet ourselves. And suddenly, without ever meaning to – without filling out a form or making a conscious decision – the good news starts to feel like a burden.

That's the moment Paul is addressing. Not at the end of faith, but early enough to course-correct. And before he explains anything else – before he talks about the law, before he goes to the cross – Paul takes us back to where faith began in the first place.

2. Remembering How Faith Actually Works (Gal. 3:6–9; Gen. 15:1–6)

After diagnosing the drift, Paul does something really wise – and honestly, a little surprising. He doesn't pull out a flow chart. He doesn't schedule a workshop. He says, *"Let me remind you of an older story."* He takes the Galatians back to Abraham – who, at this point in the story, is still called Abram. Paul does that for a reason: Abraham isn't a random example. Abraham is the spiritual ancestor everyone in the room respects. If Paul can show that Abraham lived by faith – not performance – then the Galatians haven't outgrown faith. They've wandered away from it. And when you slow Abraham's story down, it's surprisingly human.

When God calls Abraham, Abraham isn't impressive. If anything, he's the kind of person most church growth consultants would politely pass over. He's old. He's childless. He's unsettled. He doesn't have a résumé, a plan, or a clear path forward. What he has is a promise – and a lot of unanswered questions. Which, by the way, is not most people's preferred starting point.

"Lord... how is this going to work?" Which is a very polite way of saying, *"I don't see how this ends well."* *"I don't see the evidence."* *"I don't have what you're talking about."* Genesis tells us that God takes Abraham outside then points him toward the night sky and says, "Look up. Count the stars – if you can. So shall your offspring be."

And then comes the line Paul zeroes in on: *"Abram believed the Lord, and it was credited to him as righteousness."* Not after he obeyed. Not after he proved himself. Not after he got his act together. Not after he impressed anyone. Abraham believed – and God counted that trust as righteousness. Which means Abraham didn't earn a standing with God. Abraham received one. Now here's where this gets uncomfortably close to home. Abraham didn't become righteous by doing impressive things for God. Abraham became righteous by trusting God when there was no proof. And that's often where we start to drift.

We don't drift because we stop believing God exists. Most of us still believe all the right things – we just stop resting in them. We drift because trust without control makes us nervous. So we start adding structure. Systems. Metrics. Safeguards. Color-coded ones, if possible. At first, those things feel responsible. Even mature. They feel like what a "serious" Christian would do. But slowly, faith becomes less about trusting promises and more about managing outcomes. We

move from, "God will provide" to, "I'd better make sure I'm doing this right." From, "God called me" to, "I don't want to mess this up." From, "God is faithful" to, "I hope I'm being faithful enough." Which means the Galatians didn't outgrow Abraham's way of faith – they drifted away from it.

It's hard to admit, but we do the exact same thing – just with better spreadsheets. We drift when faith becomes a burden we carry instead of a promise we trust. We drift when obedience stops being a response to grace and starts becoming a way to stay in God's good graces. We drift when the Christian life feels less like freedom and more like pressure.

So Paul's point is simple but unsettling. If Abraham didn't earn God's favor, neither do we. If Abraham didn't maintain God's promise through effort, neither can we. *The way faith begins is the way faith continues – by trust, by dependence, by receiving what God gives, not by proving what we deserve.* And if that feels destabilizing, Paul would probably say, *Good*. Faith was never meant to feel controllable in the first place. Because the moment faith starts to feel heavy, it's time to remember how it actually works.

3. When Obedience Turns into Weight (Galatians 3:10–12)

Once Paul reminds the Galatians how faith actually works, he turns the corner and starts talking about the Law – which is where people usually start to get nervous, and where things often get misunderstood, both then and now. Paul is not anti-obedience. Paul is anti-obedience-as-a-system-of-salvation. They are not the same thing – but they get confused all the time. That distinction matters.

Because the irony is this: the more serious we are about obeying the law as a way to stay right with God, the heavier life becomes. And it usually happens to the people who are trying the hardest. Paul puts it bluntly: *"All who rely on observing the law are under a curse."* Not because the law is bad – but because the law is unbending. The law does not wake up in a good mood.

Think of it this way: the Law is like a perfectly calibrated scale. You can step on it every morning, and it will tell you the truth every time – but it has never once helped anyone lose weight. It tells you exactly what's there – accurately, relentlessly – but it offers no help, no mercy, and no second chances. It measures, but it cannot heal. So the more we rely on it to justify ourselves, the more pressure we feel.

And here's where this stops being abstract theology and starts showing up in your kitchen, your car, and your group text. When obedience becomes the way we secure God's approval, it rarely stays contained to our own hearts. It spills outward. We start projecting our need for perfection onto the people closest to us – usually the people who didn't sign up for that job. Spouses feel it. Children feel it. Grandchildren feel it. Church communities feel it. Not because we're trying to be harsh – but because we're trying to feel safe.

Control feels safer than trust. If I need to be right to be okay, then you need to be right too. And when others disappoint us, slow us down, or fail to meet expectations, it exposes our own fear. So criticism creeps in. Judgment follows. And grace quietly slips out the door. This is how legalism often shows up in healthy churches – not in angry sermons or mean people, but in exhaustion. Not loud. Not angry. Not mean-spirited. Just heavy.

And it's important to say this clearly: the Pharisees didn't take God's law too lightly. They took it very seriously – just not very honestly. They treated obedience as leverage, as proof, as security. Jesus constantly challenged that posture – not because obedience didn't matter, but because it was being used to avoid trust.

So Paul's warning here is not, *"Stop caring about holiness."* It's, *"Stop using holiness to save yourself."* Because the moment obedience becomes a strategy for staying on God's good side, it stops producing love – and starts producing fear. And fear is heavy. Some of us feel that weight every day. We're doing all the right things – and quietly wondering why joy feels so elusive. We're faithful. We're committed. We're responsible. But underneath it all is this quiet pressure: *Don't mess this up.* And that pressure gets louder the longer we carry it.

Paul wants the Galatians – and really, all followers of Jesus Christ – to see where that road leads. Because if righteousness really does depend on our performance, then failure isn't merely disappointing. It's *devastating*. Which is why Paul doesn't end this section with advice. He ends it by taking us somewhere else entirely.

4. Where the Weight Goes (Galatians 3:13)

At this point in the passage, Paul does something very intentional – and very pastoral. He does not say, *"So lighten up."* *"So relax."* *"So try harder the right way."* *"So find a better balance."* He doesn't offer technique. He doesn't offer advice. He doesn't offer a spiritual workaround. He doesn't offer a better system.

Instead, Paul points to an event – something that happened outside of us, on our behalf. *"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us."* Paul doesn't soften that sentence. And he doesn't rush past it. That's *not* encouragement. That's *intervention*. Something had to be done – not felt, not managed, not resolved internally. Up to this moment, Paul has been naming what goes wrong – the drift, the pressure, the weight that comes from trying to finish by effort what began by grace. Now he tells us what God has done about it.

Paul doesn't say the curse was reduced, or reinterpreted, or balanced out. He doesn't say it was adjusted. He doesn't say it was negotiated. He says it was absorbed. Fully. Personally. The weight that comes from trying to justify ourselves – the fear, the anxiety, the quiet sense that we're never quite enough – that weight doesn't get lifted by better obedience. It gets lifted because Christ steps underneath it.

"Christ became a curse for us." That sentence should stop us. Paul slows down here because he wants us to feel the shock of it. The most faithful one. The most obedient one. The only one who never lived under condemnation. *Steps into condemnation anyway – willingly.* Not because he failed – but because we do.

Friends, this is not a lesson to learn. This is not a principle to live by. This is not something to apply to our daily lives. No, this is an exchange – a taking on, and a taking away. And that's why this matters so deeply for everything Paul has been saying. If the weight we feel comes from trying to secure ourselves, then the answer cannot be more effort. The answer has to be *substitution*. Someone else has to carry what we cannot. Can you see where this is headed?

Paul is saying that's exactly what happened at the cross. Jesus doesn't just forgive sin in some abstract or sentimental way. Jesus enters the consequences of a system that crushes people who try to live under it. Which means the gospel doesn't just get us started – it carries us all the way. This is where faith changes tone. Here's what I mean...

Once we see that Christ has already taken the curse, something changes inside. Obedience stops being a way to stay safe and becomes a response to being safe. We don't obey to avoid punishment – we obey because punishment has already been dealt with. We also don't pursue holiness to earn love – we pursue holiness because love has already been given.

Here Paul is quietly guarding us from two equal and opposite mistakes: First is legalism, the belief that obedience keeps God on our side. And second is cheap grace, the belief that obedience doesn't matter at all. Jesus teaches that to us in the story of the prodigal son – the older brother is a legalist, and the younger brother practices cheap grace. Both miss the mark.

The truth of the gospel is this: When grace is real, it doesn't make obedience unnecessary – it makes obedience possible. The cross doesn't erase the call to live faithfully – it relocates the weight. Christ carries what would crush us, so obedience can become participation rather than self-justification. And when the weight is no longer on you to prove yourself, you don't need others to help prop you up. Grace creates actual room – room to breathe, room to grow, room to be honest. Paul wants the Galatians – and us – to feel that room again.

5. What This Changes in Real Life (Missio Dei)

So if grace is not only how we're saved, but how we grow, what does that actually look like on a Tuesday afternoon, or a Thursday evening? Because this is where people understandably get nervous. You can almost feel the question forming before anyone says it out loud. Any time grace is emphasized this strongly, there's often a quiet question in the room: *"Okay... but doesn't this make obedience optional? Or at least... negotiable?"*

Paul's answer is a clear and confident no – and it's important we hear why. Grace doesn't remove obedience from the Christian life – grace relocates it. It moves obedience out of fear and into freedom. When obedience is driven by fear, it's about self-protection. It's about staying out of

trouble – spiritually and otherwise. But when obedience is shaped by grace, it becomes participation. If that shift doesn't happen, faith gets heavy fast.

Some of us are living the Christian life like we're hiking with a backpack we keep adding rocks to – not because God asked us to, but because we're afraid to set it down. Every rule, every expectation, every quiet voice telling us to "try harder" and "do more" gets tossed in there, and we tell ourselves this is what faithfulness feels like. And then we wonder why the journey feels exhausting. We wonder why our discipleship seems to burn us out.

But grace doesn't just lighten the load – it changes the question we're asking in the first place. We stop asking, *"What do I have to do to stay on God's good side?"* Frankly that's an exhausting question to live with. And instead we start asking, *"How do I get to join what God is already doing?"* That's the better question! It sounds different. It feels different. That's the *missio Dei* (God's mission in the world) and grace are what free us to participate without needing that participation to justify us.

Think about how this shows up in everyday life – not in theory but in practice. When obedience is fueled by fear, we serve to prove we're faithful, we give to feel secure, we do good works to manage guilt or anxiety, and we burn out quietly and then feel guilty about being burned out – which is its own kind of irony. But when obedience flows from grace, we serve because we're free to, we give because we trust God's generosity, we love others without needing their approval in return, and we can take risks – even fail – without our identity collapsing. Which is good news, because failure turns out to be part of learning.

Grace creates a different posture. It changes how we relate to God – not as a supervisor to impress, but as the One who delights in growth over time. It changes how we relate to ourselves – not as constant projects in need of fixing, but as people already loved and still being formed. It changes how we relate to others – especially in a world already drowning in pressure, judgment, and fear. And that matters right now – not in theory, but in the world we actually wake up to every morning.

We're living in a moment where people are exhausted – politically, socially, and emotionally. Expectations are everywhere. Lines are being drawn constantly. Everyone feels like they're failing someone's standard. Which means a grace-shaped church becomes a powerful witness – often without trying to be. Not because truth doesn't matter. Not because obedience disappears. But because neither truth nor obedience is weaponized.

A grace-shaped community is one where people can tell the truth about themselves, growth is expected but perfection is not, and obedience is practiced but never used as leverage. That kind of community stands out. Teenagers notice it. Young adults ache for it. Parents need it. Seniors long for it. Because most people already feel crushed by things we "must" do or things we're "expected" to do. They don't need another one added to the pile. The gospel lifts the weight – and then invites us to return to living the way we began.

6. Living the Way We Began (The Return)

So let me bring us back to where Paul started – not with an argument, not with a warning, but with a question. *“Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”* It’s not a trick question. It’s an honest one. In other words: Are you still living the way you began? Or have you slowly started carrying things you were never asked to carry?

The Christian life doesn’t start with grace and then graduate into pressure. It doesn’t open with relief and quietly turn into a stress test. It doesn’t begin with trust and then move on to self-management. It doesn’t open with freedom and then slowly hand us a heavier and heavier load. Christ has already carried what would crush us. Christ has already borne the curse we could never lift. Christ has already secured what we are so tempted to manage ourselves.

This is such a relief, because most of us are not nearly as good at managing life as we think. And since Christ has already done what we could not, the pressure to save ourselves is finally lifted. This means we are free – not careless or disengaged, but truly free. Free to obey without fear. Free to love without leverage. Free to serve without needing it to save us.

That freedom isn’t just good news for us. It’s good news for the people who have to live with us! When a community of faith lives by God’s grace, it shows – in how we treat one another, in how we face disagreement, in how we tell the truth about ourselves, and in how we extend mercy instead of pressure. In other words, we begin to look a little more like Jesus.

So if you hear Paul’s words this morning and recognize yourself – not in rebellion, but in drift – hear this clearly: You haven’t failed out of grace. You haven’t wandered beyond mercy. You don’t need to prove your way back. You simply return to living the way you began — by **trusting** what Christ has already done, by **receiving** what God freely gives, and by **walking** in the freedom of the Holy Spirit. That’s not just how salvation starts. That’s how it continues, for the rest of our lives. Thanks be to God for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.