

SERMON NOTES
Galatians 3:1-5
Experiential Theology

- How do you bridge the gap between who you are and who God intends you to become?
- *We understand that only the Cross of Christ can bridge the gap between sinful man and holy God – but what bridges the gap between sinful man and sanctified man? Between sinful man and Christ-like man?*
- *Trusting Christ as the Bridge to God and heaven, we often proceed to try to grow in Christ-likeness by our own efforts in keeping God’s commandments*
- We act as though we believe that Salvation is Christ’s Project, but Sanctification – growing in holiness – is Our Project

- Paul teaches the Galatians that not only our Justification (acceptance with God), but also our Christian living and spiritual growth are by grace – through faith
- *Our spiritual growth is not our project any more than our salvation*
- We live and grow by grace – through faith

- And what is the Source of our spiritual growth?
- *The indwelling Holy Spirit*
- *Spiritual growth is a project of the Spirit*

- And how does Paul make that case – that the whole process of salvation – both initial justification and ongoing sanctification – *the whole process is by grace through faith – and not by human efforts to obey the Law or follow religious rules?*
- He will eventually use Scripture and logic, but he begins in chapter 3 with an argument from experience

Galatians 3:1 - 5 (NIV) ¹You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. ²I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? ³Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? ⁴Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing? ⁵Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?

- Paul asks a series of questions based on their experience of God:
- *How were you born again – how did you first receive the Spirit?*
- *After beginning with the Spirit – by faith – how are you now seeking to grow into spiritual maturity in Christ?*

- *How have you experienced God working in your lives? What has triggered the manifestations of God's miraculous power in your midst?*
- **Have you experienced God's salvation and God's miraculous power by means of following religious rules – or by means of faith?**
- Their experience with God demonstrates that the Spirit of God regenerates us and sanctifies us – gives us new life and then grows and strengthens that new life – as we trust in Christ and rely on His grace rather than relying on our own efforts to be good
- Paul makes his theological point by appealing to their spiritual experiences
- *How does God work to accomplish His saving purposes in our lives?*
- We come to know God by experience
- Some Christians speak derisively of what is called “experience-based theology” – as though we can only know God by means of studying propositional truth statements in the Bible
- *But who is God? And what is the Bible? And how has God revealed Himself in the Bible?*
- **God is a Living Being – a Personal Being – not merely an intellectual ideal or religious concept**
- How do we get to know a Person? Primarily by reading a book?
- *We get to know living persons by means of personal interactions and communication and shared experiences in the context of a relationship*
- Only in the case of dead persons are we restricted to learning about them by reading books
- Of course the Bible is our authoritative source for our knowledge of God
- *But the Bible is not primarily a systematic theology textbook nor a list of propositional truth statements*
- The Bible is primarily a record of God's dealings with His People and of His Personal Visit to our planet
- *Much of the OT & NT consists of stories of people's experiences with God*
- These are not just biographical stories written so that we could learn about heroes of old – **these are theological narratives**
- Why are the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, David, Elijah, Daniel and Esther in the Bible?

- *To teach us moral principles and to teach us to emulate the lives of these heroes of the faith?*
- NO! These stories are in the Bible to teach us about God!

- Who is God? What is He like? How does He communicate with us? What pleases and displeases Him?
- *We learn about God and His character and His ways and His purposes by studying these narratives of God's dealings with His People*
- This is biblical experiential theology

- One of the most important theological chapters in the Bible for Gentile believers like us is Acts 15 – the Jerusalem Council
- *Question: Do Gentile believers need to become Jews, be circumcised, and obey the Law of Moses in order to be fully accepted in the People of God?*
- How was this theological debate settled?
- *Primarily by Paul and Peter testifying to the Gentiles experiencing the saving grace of Jesus Christ and the powerful working of the Holy Spirit by faith*
- Experiential Theology
- *The same kind of experiential theology we see in Galatians 3*

- God is not just a religious idea that we study in a book
- *He is a Living God – and we come to know Him by experience as well as by studying the Bible*

- Why then are some Christians so distrustful of Experiential Theology?
- *Because experiences can be deceiving as well as revealing*

- Many people think of religious experiences in terms of two categories:
- (1) *Invalid and Deceiving*
- (2) *Valid and Normative*
- I would like to suggest a third category:
- (3) *Valid but not normative*

- Here are some examples of each:

- (1) *Invalid & Deceiving: Séances*
 - In a séance a medium claims to be the channel for communication with the spirit of a dead person
 - That is a deception*
 - What happens in a séance is either a fraud – or a demonic manifestation

(2) *Valid and Normative: spiritual experiences that are authentic, of God, and for everyone*

- Experiencing God speaking to us through His Word, the Bible
- Experiencing Christ's Presence and Grace in a special way during Communion
- Experiencing increased spiritual boldness and power by being filled with the Spirit
- Experiencing peace & serenity by praying, giving thanks, and meditating on the love of God
- Experiencing spiritual & financial blessings resulting from generous giving

These kinds of spiritual experiences are valid and normative – they are authentic, of God, and for everyone

(2) *Valid but not normative: spiritual experiences or encounters with God that are authentic, of God – but not for everyone*

Many such biblical examples:

- Moses and the burning bush*
- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace*
- Elijah and the fire from heaven consuming the sacrifice on Mt. Carmel*
- Peter walking on the water*
- People healed by touching Paul's handkerchief*
- Ezekiel's vision of the glory of God and the whirring wheels within wheels*
- Philip carried away by the Spirit after baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch*
- Gideon and the wet & dry fleeces*

- *Dozens of other extraordinary experiences in the Bible that were valid – authentic encounters with God – but not normative – not for everyone*
- Many examples today as well of unusual spiritual experiences that are valid but not normative:
 - *Healing miracles*
 - *Dramatic conversion experiences*
 - *Sudden deliverance from addictions*
 - *Hearing God's voice audibly*
 - *Christ revealing himself in dreams and visions*
 - *Deliverance from demonic oppression or from evil spirits in houses*
 - *Manifestations of the Spirit that overpower one's emotions or body*
 - *Speaking in tongues, prophetic utterances, etc.*

- Many of the conflicts, disagreements, wounded feelings and damaged relationships among Christians result from a failure to acknowledge spiritual experiences that are valid but not normative
- *We wrongly reduce the categories to valid & normative – or invalid & deceiving*
- Then the person with the experience thinks: *all Christians should experience what I have experienced*
- And the person listening to the experience thinks: *since I have not had that experience, then no one else could have either – it must be invalid*
- *The wrong assumption being made by both parties is this: God treats everyone the same // God grows everyone the same way // God heals by the same means // God delivers from sin, addictions and spiritual oppression the same way*
- *Therefore, God will work in your life the same way He worked in mine*
- And, if God didn't work that way in my life – then He couldn't possibly have worked that way in your life either
- What we are really saying is: *My personal experience – or lack of same – is the standard by which to evaluate the experiences of others*
- But what does the Bible teach?
- *That God treats us all the same and works in our lives the same way using the same means? NO!*
- God has an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) for each of His children
- *In a classroom, even a handful of IEPs can be a burden for a classroom teacher*
- Teachers are finite – and therefore for the most part they must teach to a group
- **But God is holy – infinite – personal**
- *He has an individualized growth plan for each of us*
- He uses different ways and means and methods and situations and experiences to shape us into the likeness of His Son
- So how do we evaluate whether a spiritual experience is valid – of God – or not?
- *Jonathan Edwards dealt with this very issue when evaluating some extraordinary experiences during the Great Awakening*
- We can't evaluate by the presence or absence or intensity of emotions // nor by how rare or unusual or weird an experience is (plenty of weird stuff in the Bible) // nor by whether we or our friends have had the same experience // nor by whether that exact experience is recorded in the Bible (the Bible does not claim to be an exhaustive record of all possible spiritual experiences)

- We judge not by the nature of the experience but rather by the nature of the fruit produced by the experience
- The key Question is this: *Is that spiritual experience producing greater love for God and neighbor? Greater freedom from sin? Greater passion for Christ and His Kingdom? Greater obedience to God and His Word? Greater holiness of life?*
- **If so – then that is the work of God – for neither Satan nor the world nor the flesh produces that kind of godly fruit**
- *However unusual the experience may be – only God produces holy and godly fruit*
- Godly fruit proves the experience is valid – but not necessarily normative

- In our own family – two of my sons-in-law and one of my daughters have had extraordinary spiritual experiences that I have not had
- *Positive, life-shaping experiences that produced godly fruit*
- Valid, authentic works of God
- *But not normative – not for everyone*

- The unity and health of the body of Christ could be greatly enhanced if we all acknowledged that God has an Individualized Growth Plan for each of us
- *That He does not treat us all the same*
- That He does not communicate with us or work in our lives the same way
- *That many of our experiences with God are of the “valid-but-not-normative” variety*

- Therefore, we learn about God and His ways from each other’s experiences (Experiential Theology) – as well as from the Bible
- *These experiences are valid if not contrary to Scripture and if producing godly fruit*
- But not normative unless Scripture teaches that the experience is mandatory for all believers

- *This understanding of “valid but not normative” will enable us to safeguard Christian unity by validating each other’s experiences as real – and yet without imposing our personal experiences or encounters with God as mandatory for all other believers*
- ***Let us give glory to God for the great things He has done!***