

Spiritual Growth Lessons from Christian Ambassadors

Lesson 54 – From Hopeless Effort, To Expectant Faith

By Sharon K. Griffiee

How often have you heard yourself or someone else admit, “*When it comes to following God, no matter how hard I try, I can’t seem to get it right?*” In our efforts to be right with God, we read about righteousness in the Scriptures, which is good! We long to achieve righteousness in our own life. But then, as we read along in our study time, we might make the mistake of seeing God as a distant, detached rule maker and the Bible as a book of laws, rules, and regulations for the game of life. The result?

Every time we try and fail, our natural tendency is to either “give up” or “try harder”. If we decide to try harder, we spend enormous energy attempting to perform the “oughts” and “shoulds”, which we can never accomplish through self-effort. The dilemma?

Anytime we try to follow Jesus, not by grace through faith (**Ephesians 2:8-9**), but through the Old Testament Law, we have taken our eyes off of Jesus and our personal relationship with Him. The reason we can’t seem to *get it right* is for the simple reason that we are living our lives separate from Christ, and are trying to earn salvation on our own good works. Paul declares,

Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV) - *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast.*

The Apostle Paul’s admonition to the Galatians on this subject, gives us a clearer understanding,

Galatians 5:4-6 (NIV) - *You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*

By studying the context of these verses of scripture, when Paul speaks about the Galatians *falling away*

from grace, he is not referring to grace as a loss of salvation. He is referring to *grace* as God’s method of operation (MO) in bringing them to salvation. For them to fall away from grace, then, is to fall back into **legalism**.

The Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines **legalism** as: strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code. For the Galatians to fall back, that is to believe it mandatory for one to be circumcised in order to obtain salvation, was in effect following legalism to the maximum degree. Such a falling away from grace (God’s MO), back into old legalistic practices, meant that in their every day life, they were no better off than they were before accepting Christ. Paul scolding them said,

Galatians 5:4a (KJV) - *“Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law...”*

All the freedom, all the joy of living by faith as a child of God is removed. It is literally traded for something that is worth nothing. If a person has a legalistic mindset they are so busy trying to *perform*, they miss out on the joy of a growing closeness, a deepening love for Jesus. And their inward battle to *get it right*, will wear away all hope. It is no wonder that the Apostle Paul was upset and disappointed. In His letter to the Galatians he skips his usual warm praises of them, expressing instead shock and dismay.

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

It is understandable why Paul was troubled. He could foresee peril ahead for the Galatians in their thinking. Brothers and sisters, we can relate to and apply his teachings to our own life. Paul had powerfully and clearly taught them the gospel of Jesus Christ, proclaiming that a relationship with God was possible based only on *faith in the finished work of Christ*. The Galatians had heard and accepted the message. Yet, they were on the verge of devaluing what Jesus had done. Why?

Others had come into the Galatian churches after Paul, teaching a different gospel. A gospel which stated that believers must be circumcised and observe certain rules, if they were to be in right relationship with God. Paul knew this would be a death sentence. If their thinking didn't change, they would go back to trusting their own human effort (their keeping of rituals, laws, ceremonies) to gain acceptance by God. Faith in Christ would then become just one of many steps in salvation, not the only one. Paul was deeply concerned with this perversion of the gospel and said so,

Galatians 1:6-8 (NIV) - I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!

From Hopeless Effort, To Expectant Faith.

Anyone who tries to have a relationship with Jesus Christ based on the legalism of the Old Testament Law is living his (her) life in fear, not *expectant faith*. How so? There is an underlying fear built into the minds of those who try to follow the strict adherence to the law. It is the constant fear of losing their salvation! If they slip up or trip up in any way, they fear they may be sent to hell. This is how *legalists* view their own life and the life of all those around them. The driving force behind these thoughts is the fear of punishment. And it does not come from God. On the contrary, God's love drives out fear.

1 John 4:18-19 (NIV) - There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us.

Brothers and sisters, the Gospel is **not**; I am saved until the next time I sin! Those misguided thoughts produce nothing but *hopeless effort* – always striving, but never attaining. There is no purpose nor joy in trying to earn, through human effort, what Jesus has already provided *through faith* in His finished work on the cross. Jesus paid the full price for our sins. What we need to do now is to take hold of that truth. Because of God's Grace (unmerited divine assistance) sin is not something to fear, but to conquer! The challenge Paul gave to the Galatians is also ours!

Galatians 2:19-20 (KJV) - For I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God. I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

Questions for Personal or Group Study

(Please do not mail to CA for grading):

1. If we are trying to earn salvation through our own human efforts, what does this say about our personal relationship with Jesus? **Galatians 5:4**
2. What did Paul mean when he said to the Galatians *you have fallen away from grace*? **Ephesians 2:8-9**
3. For the Galatians to fall back into *legalism* was a serious matter. Their daily lives would be dramatically affected. How? **Galatians 5:4a**
4. What is the underlying fear built into the minds of legalists; those who try to follow *through* human effort, the strict adherence to the Mosaic Law?
5. What is the driving force behind a legalist's fears? **1 John 4:18-19**
6. If Christ lives in me, sin is not feared, but conquered! How? **Galatians 2:20; Romans 8:2-4, 34-37**