Renew—“Silk Purse...Sow’s Ear”  
Galatians 3:1-6  
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On occasion, I would hear my older relatives use a figure of speech that I found strange to my ears. When confronted by an impossible situation, they would say, “You can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear.” As strange as it sounds, the logic of it is pretty clear. No matter how hard you try to make a silk handbag out of a pig’s ear—brush it, boil it, stretch it, tan it, or stain it—you simply cannot do it! It’s a physical impossibility!

When it comes to moral progress of the human heart, I think the same figure of speech applies. No matter how hard we try with the tools of self-discipline, human resolve and personal reforms, we cannot turn the heart of a sinner into the heart of a saint any more than you can make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear! It is a moral impossibility to transform our hearts.

I was reminded of this truth years ago while taking an American literature class in college. One of the required texts was Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography. In it, he talked about a list of virtues that he wanted to master. They consisted of things like temperance, silence, order, resolution, and frugality, to name just a few. So he resolved to follow a careful process to master these virtues. But in a moment of honest reflection he made the following statement:

It was about this time I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wished to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined. While my care was employed in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another; habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason. (Benjamin Franklin, The Autobiography of Ben Franklin, 38).

As hard as he tried, poor Ben couldn’t perfect himself with his own code of conduct! The apostle Paul said something remarkably similar in Romans 7, which I interpret as the futility of living life under the law apart from the gospel (apart from Christ). He said:

7:18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing…. (Rom 7:18-19)

In sum, he knew the right thing to do under the law but had no inner ability to live it out. No inner power because of the gravitational pull of the sinful heart (the “inclination that was…too strong for reason,” that Franklin spoke of).

There is a way, however. While progress may be an impossible task for us as humans, it’s not impossible for the power of God through Jesus Christ. Jesus died and gave us his Spirit to make saints out of sinners. The gospel alone can do this. And that’s what Paul argues in Galatians 3:1-5. Listen to Paul’s argument.

3:1 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. 2 Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by 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 Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith…? (Gal 3:1-5)
Obviously, you can tell that the apostle is a little bit upset over what’s happening in these churches. But his blunt and blistering tone is an expression of his intense love and concern. They’re short-circuiting the power of Christ in their lives. So he asks them six penetrating questions to show them their foolishness. But all six of these questions, taken together make one essential point—an argument drawn from experience.

1. **We first experienced the Spirit of God based on our trust in Christ not our moral performance.**

   For sake of time, let me summarize the Galatian experience. First, Paul reminds them of their experience of the crucified Jesus saying, “It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified” (v. 10). Paul had preached about Jesus in such a way that they saw-through Paul’s words-a verbal portrait of Jesus crucified. The crucifixion of Jesus was central to his preaching because in the cross of Jesus, God provided freedom for the sinner—forgiveness, acceptance, reconciliation, adoption, sonship, a new heart, a new joy, and the hope of a new creation. To this powerful message of the cross, the Galatians responded in faith and therein experienced the Holy Spirit. Things were changing in their lives.

   In light of this experience, Paul asks the two critical questions (followed by a summary question in verse 5). First (v. 2), “Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” He’s essentially asking, “When you first trusted in Christ and experienced God in your life, did you experience it because you were circumcised or in the middle of keeping the Ten Commandments OR because you believed in Jesus?” The answer would have been an obvious, “Because we trusted in Jesus!” Many of us can look back at our lives and remember when we first came to faith in Christ. Unless you grew up in the church, in which case your conversion experience might have been subtle, you can probably look back and remember experiencing the love of Christ and the joy of knowing you were forgiven (initial fruits of the Spirit’s presence). Did this happen because you were good—living a “moral life” at the time? The answer would be, “no!” It certainly wasn’t in my case! How about you? Paul’s point is obvious (for the Galatians and us). The truth is that God came into our lives on the basis of our trust in Jesus NOT because we were keeping a moral or religious code. That’s the first part of his argument. **We first experienced the Spirit of God based on our trust in Christ not our moral performance.**

2. **We continue to experience the perfecting work of the Spirit based upon faith in Christ, not our moral performance.**

   Building on this, Paul asks another related question which gets to the heart of his argument. If we began our Christian experience through faith not works, then on what basis do we continue the Christian life toward Christ-likeness (moral transformation from the inside out)? Paul asks, “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected [or completed] by the flesh?” (Keep an eye on those two verbs begun and perfected.) In short, he’s asking, “You started by the Spirit apart from the law, now do you make progress through human effort at keeping the law?” The implication is that they started by the Spirit and were now continuing through human effort by trying to keep the code.

   This is where the Galatians and dare I say many Christians, make a fatal mistake? We preach a gospel of grace on the front side, “Jesus paid it all, trust in him!” But then after people come into the church, they experience a strong pressure to conform their lives to a set of rules.
On the front side we center on grace while on the backside we center on rules (or law). And most of this is done unconsciously. We evangelize by preaching Christ alone and then we switch and push sanctification (moral transformation) by preaching rules. Or let me put it another way. In the gospel we hear what Christ has done for us. In the church we often hear how much we need to do for God. The net effect of this kind of over-emphasis on command is to inadvertently push people back upon the resources of their own human effort, “I must make this happen.” And a massive short-circuit begins to happen—like spilling coffee on a laptop! Don’t misunderstand. Moral instruction and directives have their place. But not at the center!

Why? Because they lack power! Listen to Paul again. He asked, “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” Here in this verse flesh is shorthand for human effort. Think about it. The Spirit of God is the one who hovered over the dark waters and called things that didn’t exist into an ordered, beautiful and living creation. That’s power. Galaxies were born by the Spirit’s will. And the Christian life begins with God’s Spirit hovering over our dark hearts and in an act of amazing power bringing us to life. Now how absurd or foolish is it for us to think that now we need to take over the process and perfect it in our own human power through some moral code? That’s like going from the power of the sun to the power of a watch battery. Can you imagine if humanity did this with our planet? “Let’s unplug ourselves from the sun and plug ourselves into a 9 volt battery.” “Utter foolishness!!” you would say. Yes. That’s what Paul is saying. “Are you SO foolish?” His point is that the power of change in the Christian life is the same in the middle as it was in the beginning. We don’t start off with the Spirit and then perfect ourselves through our own feeble efforts at keeping rules. We don’t begin by relying on Christ and then grow by relying on law.

Yet that’s what we often gravitate toward. In my opinion, one of the reasons for this is that the world we live in requires us to be pragmatic and systems-oriented. We think very pragmatically, “If I can figure out the practical steps to take, then I’ll experience the change I seek.” So we develop our spiritual systems of change. And we do so by way of reliance. And like Franklin, we realize very quickly that we can’t transform ourselves from sinners to saints. To qualify, there’s nothing wrong with rhythms of discipline in life—like bible study, prayer, going to church etc. The problem is when we come to rely (faith) upon the system rather than the Christ; and our inner ability (flesh) to manage the system rather than the Spirit.

Brothers and sisters, as Christians we must abandoned all human based attempts to perfect ourselves and cast ourselves wholly on the only One who can. Or let me put it in Paul’s own words. He said, “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6, italics added). He uses the same verbs as in our Galatians passage. And there’s no use of contingent words like might, may or should. It’s a certainty for true Christians that he will complete or perfect his people! As we look to Jesus, his Spirit perfects our lives by his great power. In a sense, then, we can relax and stop trying to do it on our own as if you can add anything to what God has and is doing. Our main objective in life is to trust in the Crucified One and rely wholly upon his Spirit within us. And as we do, he will change us from one degree of glory to another in a way nothing else can. Jesus taught us the same truth in John 15. He said, “If you want to bear fruit, abide in me.” Our job is to stay rooted and connected to Jesus by trusting him. He’s the one who energizes the change.

You might say, “But what about the rules, Dan?” Isn’t there any place for rules? Of course there is. Obviously, in a sinful world we need rules for society, rules for our kids and instructions to guide us (many of which are in the New Testament, though “rule” is a deficient word).
However, let me say this in the strongest way possible. Rules and moral instruction can do only so much. On the negative side all they can do is show us when we are wrong—when we’ve sinned. On the positive side, the best that they can do is show us the direction we should go. But moral instruction itself has no power to take us there.

Here’s the crucial thing to keep crystal clear in our minds when it comes to rules. Rules can never be a means of relating to God or a basis of transformation. They can do neither. That means at least three things: 1.) We must never rely upon rules, 2. Never focus on rules, and 3.) Never establish our sense of identity/worth on keeping rules. To do this is not only a short-circuiting of the gospel but a denial of the gospel. The Christian way is altogether different. The beginning, middle and end of the Christian life, along with our growth all along the way, is found in the simple absolute that he who began a good work in us will be faithful to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus. Even when we stumble and fall, we are not to lose heart. You know why? Because as we look to Jesus, even in our failures, we can be confident that his power is at work in us to will and to do according to his good pleasure!

There is only one who can make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear. And that’s the Lord. Don’t short circuit the gospel by adding other things to it. Don’t stunt your own life by thinking you can perfect yourself. That places our focus on us and on rules as opposed to Christ! Rather, set Jesus before your eyes as the all-saving, all-satisfying, all-securing focus of life—trusting that his mighty Spirit is right now perfecting your life as we trust in him. He’s the only answer to a lazy heart, a greedy heart, a lusting heart, a proud heart or a despairing heart. It’s only as we fix our eyes on him as the author and finisher of our faith that his Spirit enables us to run the race set before us.

There once was a little Sunflower, who realized that he was the smallest plant in the garden. He wanted to grow big and tall like the rose and lily. And so he asked a nearby dandelion how to grow. The dandelion suggested that he stretch himself three times a day and he would grow tall like all the rose and the lily. So he stretched and stretched! But to no avail, he was still a tiny sunflower. So he asked his other neighbor, the morning flower how to grow tall. The morning flower said, “Try flapping your petals really hard, and you’ll grow big and tall like the rose and the lily.” So the little sunflower flapped and flapped until he could flap no more. Realizing he was no taller, he gave up in despair. Finally, a wise honeybee landed on the little sunflower. Seeing the tiny sunflower’s despair, the honeybee asked, “What’s wrong?” In despair the sunflower poured out his heart. To this the wise honeybee said, “Foolish sunflower. There is only one thing necessary to grow big and tall. You must set your face fully and completely on the Sun, everyday!” So each day the little sunflower looked up and saw something he’d never seen before. He saw something of unspeakable beauty and light. Drawn to its warmth, the sunflower began looking at the sun from dawn to dusk. Soon he forgot about the rose and the lily as he gazed at the glory of the sun. And as he gazed, he grew…and he grew…until he was the tallest plant in the garden. You, church, are no different. This one thing is necessary. Look to the Son and his Spirit will grow you.