

Homiletics Analysis: Galatians 3:1–29

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Galatians 3 is Paul's sustained theological argument for the gospel against the Judaizing perversion threatening the Galatian churches. Having confronted Peter to his face in chapter 2 and established the principle that justification is by faith in Christ alone and not by works of the Law, Paul now moves from personal narrative and apostolic authority to biblical and theological demonstration. He marshals three interlocking lines of argument: experiential (the Spirit was received by faith, not Law-keeping, vv. 1–5), scriptural (Abraham was justified by faith, vv. 6–9), and covenantal (the Law cannot annul the prior Abrahamic promise, vv. 15–18). He explains the purpose of the Law — not as the path to righteousness but as a temporary custodian exposing sin and driving humanity toward the promised seed (vv. 19–25). The chapter closes with a thunderclap declaration: in Christ Jesus, through faith, the believer is clothed with Christ, and every ethnic, social, and gender division that once defined religious standing before God is abolished — all are one in Christ, and all are Abraham's offspring and heirs (vv. 26–29).

The argument moves in three phases: (1) Appeal to experience and Scripture — the Galatians received the Spirit by faith; Abraham was credited righteousness by faith; the blessing of Abraham comes through the same faith (vv. 1–14); (2) The Law's subordinate and temporary role — it cannot override the earlier unconditional covenant; it was added as a confining, diagnostic custodian until Christ came (vv. 15–25); (3) The new status of all believers in Christ — clothed with Christ, children of God, one in Him, heirs of Abraham's promise (vv. 26–29).

This Text — Intent

Paul's intent is not merely to correct a doctrinal error but to shock the Galatians back to their senses and then anchor them — permanently — in the grace of the gospel. The opening "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" is pastoral horror, not academic critique. God's intent through this chapter is to sever the Galatian believers' attachment to the Law as a source of righteousness or spiritual completion, and to reattach them — through Paul's rigorous argument — to Christ and Christ alone as the ground of their standing, their inheritance, and their identity. The chapter aims to produce not merely intellectual correction but doxological reorientation: readers who were drifting toward performance-based religion are confronted with the sheer gift-character of the gospel and called to live out of that gift rather than supplement it. The final verses (26–29) are not merely doctrinal conclusion — they are the intended landing place: a community of people

who know themselves to be sons of God, clothed with Christ, heirs of a promise that preceded and supersedes the Law.

Subject Sentence: Justification by faith alone in Christ alone — grounded in Abraham, fulfilled in Christ, abolishing every human distinction.

Primary Claim: God is confronting every attempt to supplement or complete the gospel with human religious performance, and calling believers to rest their entire standing — past, present, and future — in the promise fulfilled in Christ alone, which makes them full heirs of Abraham and full members of God’s family.

Interpretive Evaluation

The meaning of “works of the Law” (vv. 2, 5, 10)

The most consequential interpretive dispute in this chapter — and in Galatians as a whole — concerns the referent of “works of the Law” (*erga nomou*). The New Perspective on Paul (N.T. Wright, James Dunn) argues that “works of the Law” refers primarily to boundary markers — circumcision, dietary laws, Sabbath observance — the ethnic identity badges that separated Jew from Gentile. On this reading, Paul’s target is Jewish ethnic exclusivism, not merit-based self-righteousness; the contrast is not grace versus works but inclusion versus exclusion. This reading *acknowledges* a genuine exegetical observation: the immediate context in Galatians involves Judaizers demanding Gentile circumcision and the social pressure to conform to Jewish practice. The ethnic dimension of the dispute is real and must not be minimized.

However, this reading must be *qualified* and ultimately *refuted* as an account of Paul’s full argument. Paul’s citation of Deuteronomy 27:26 in verse 10 — “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them” — goes well beyond boundary markers. The curse Paul invokes is the comprehensive demand of the Law’s total obedience, not merely its social functions. The problem Paul identifies is not simply that the Law divides Jew from Gentile but that it places every person under a curse they cannot escape by performance. Similarly, verse 11 — “the righteous shall live by faith” (Habakkuk 2:4) — is a universal soteriological principle, not a statement about ethnic inclusion. The Reformed reading, shared by Luther, Calvin, and Moo, correctly understands “works of the Law” as referring to any and all law-keeping undertaken as the basis for righteousness before God — including but not limited to ethnic boundary markers. The narrowing proposed by the New Perspective cannot account for the full range of Paul’s argument, particularly the Habakkuk citation and the curse-logic of verse 10.

The nature and purpose of the Law (vv. 19–25)

A second significant interpretive issue concerns Paul's statement that the Law was "added because of transgressions" (v. 19) and his metaphor of the Law as a *paidagogos* (vv. 24–25). Lutheran interpretation has historically read Paul here as establishing a sharp discontinuity between Law and gospel, with the Law's primary function being to expose sin and drive sinners to Christ (the "second use" of the Law). This is exegetically strong and reflects the plain sense of verses 22–24. However, Lutheran readings sometimes overstate the discontinuity to the point of making the Law entirely negative — a problem to be escaped rather than a gift to be fulfilled. The Reformed reading offers a necessary *qualification*: the Law in this passage is not being evaluated comprehensively but in its specific function as a covenant instrument. Paul is arguing against the Law as a *system of justification*, not against the Law's ongoing revelatory and normative functions. The *paidagogos* metaphor (a household slave who escorts children to school but does not teach them) captures the Law's confined, temporary, supervisory role in the period before Christ — not its total meaning or function in the life of the redeemed. The Reformed distinction between the Law's civil, ceremonial, and moral functions helps here: Paul's argument targets the ceremonial and covenantal-boundary functions of the Law as a justification mechanism, not the moral law's ongoing authority.

"All one in Christ Jesus" (v. 28) and its social application

Verse 28 — "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" — is among the most contested verses in Galatians. Some egalitarian readers treat this as a programmatic social manifesto abolishing all distinctions in the church and society, including distinctions of office and function between men and women. This reading must be *refuted* as an exegetical conclusion from this verse, though not because the social dimension is irrelevant. Paul's argument in verse 28 concerns *standing before God* — specifically, the equal right of all believers to the inheritance of Abraham, regardless of ethnicity, social status, or sex. The verse is a soteriological declaration, not a governance charter. Paul makes this clear in verse 29: "then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." The point is inheritance, not office. The New Testament's complementarian passages on church leadership (1 Timothy 2, 1 Corinthians 14) are not in tension with verse 28 because they are addressing a different question entirely. A genuine contribution from egalitarian readings is their insistence that the social implications of justification by faith are real — the gospel *does* demolish ethnic and class hierarchies in the community of faith, and expositors must not domesticate this. The Reformed reading holds both: equal standing before God and equal inheritance in Christ (v. 28), and differentiation of roles within the covenant community that does not compromise that equal standing.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 15:6** — "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." Paul's direct citation (v. 6); the Abrahamic precedent that faith-

righteousness is not a Pauline novelty but the original pattern of covenant relationship.

- **Habakkuk 2:4** — “The righteous shall live by faith.” Paul’s citation in verse 11 grounds the faith-principle not merely in Abraham’s pre-Law history but in the prophetic tradition within the Law period itself — undermining any claim that the Law era was fundamentally about merit-based righteousness.
- **Deuteronomy 27:26** — “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law.” Paul’s citation in verse 10 establishes the comprehensive and unattainable demand of the Law as a justification system — the curse from which Christ redeems (v. 13).
- **Isaiah 53:4–6, 10–12** — The Servant who bears the curse and sin of others, making many to be accounted righteous. The theological ground for Christ becoming “a curse for us” (v. 13) — substitutionary atonement as the mechanism by which the blessing of Abraham reaches the Gentiles.
- **Romans 4:1–25** — Paul’s extended parallel argument: Abraham justified by faith before circumcision, making him the father of all who believe, whether circumcised or not. The fullest exposition of the Abraham argument initiated here in Galatians 3.

Aim: To demonstrate from Scripture and experience that the gospel of justification by faith alone in Christ alone is not a Pauline novelty but the original and enduring covenant pattern, so that believers abandon every performance-based supplement to Christ and rest fully in their identity as clothed-in-Christ heirs of Abraham.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
3:1	Paul’s sharp rebuke: “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” — Christ crucified was publicly portrayed before them	The word <i>bewitched</i> (<i>ebaskanen</i>) implies a spell cast against clear sight; the Galatians had a clear view of Christ crucified and have inexplicably turned from it
3:2–3	Appeal to experience: Did you receive the Spirit by works of Law or by hearing with faith? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?	Two rhetorical questions whose answers are obvious — the appeal is to what the Galatians themselves know and experienced

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
3:4–5	Did you suffer so many things in vain? Does God supply the Spirit and work miracles among you by works of Law or by hearing with faith?	The Galatians' own suffering for the gospel and the ongoing work of the Spirit among them both testify to the faith-basis of their reception of grace
3:6	Scripture: Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6)	The experiential argument gives way to the scriptural argument; Abraham is introduced as the paradigm case
3:7	Therefore: those who are of faith (<i>hoi ek pisteōs</i>) are the sons of Abraham	The conclusion from v. 6: faith, not ethnicity or circumcision, defines Abrahamic sonship
3:8–9	The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham: "In you shall all the nations be blessed" (Genesis 12:3)	The blessing of Abraham was always intended for all nations; the gospel is not a revision of the Abrahamic covenant but its fulfillment
3:10	All who rely on works of the Law are under a curse; citation of Deuteronomy 27:26 — perfection of law-keeping is required	The Law as justification system places everyone under a curse, because no one keeps it fully
3:11	No one is justified before God by the Law; "The righteous shall live by faith" (Habakkuk 2:4)	Faith-justification is established within the Old Testament prophetic tradition itself
3:12	The Law is not of faith; "The one who does them shall live by them" (Leviticus 18:5)	Law and faith operate on different principles; Law demands performance, faith receives promise
3:13	Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us — "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" (Deuteronomy 21:23)	The mechanism of redemption: substitutionary curse-bearing; Christ takes the curse the Law pronounces on law-breakers

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
3:14	So that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, and we might receive the promised Spirit through faith	The purpose of the redemption: Abrahamic blessing extended to all nations; the Spirit as the fulfillment of promise
3:15–16	Covenant analogy: even a human covenant, once ratified, cannot be annulled or added to; the promises were made to Abraham and to his “offspring” (singular) — which is Christ	The promises are irrevocable; the seed is Christ — Paul’s reading of Genesis 12/17 as christologically concentrated
3:17–18	The Law, coming 430 years after the covenant, cannot annul it; the inheritance is by promise, not Law	The chronological argument: the Sinai covenant is posterior to the Abrahamic covenant and cannot override it
3:19	Why then the Law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come; it was put in place through angels by an intermediary	The Law’s purpose is transactional and temporary: to expose transgression; it was mediated (implying distance from God), unlike the direct promise to Abraham
3:20–21	An intermediary implies more than one party; but God is one; the Law is not against the promises — but it cannot give life or righteousness	The Law’s mediated character contrasts with the directness of God’s unconditional promise; Law and promise serve different purposes without contradiction
3:22	The Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe	The Law’s imprisoning function is teleological: confinement drives to the promise
3:23–24	Before faith came, we were held captive under the Law, imprisoned until faith would be revealed; the Law was our <i>paidagogos</i> until Christ	The <i>paidagogos</i> metaphor: a slave escort, not a teacher — custodial, confining, temporary; its function ends when the child reaches the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
3:25	But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a <i>paidagogos</i>	destination The era of the Law's custodial function has ended with the coming of Christ; believers are no longer in the custodial state
3:26	For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith	The new status: full sonship (<i>huioi theou</i>) — the language of inheritance and standing, not merely membership
3:27	As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ	Baptism as the sign of union with Christ — the clothing metaphor: identity is now Christ himself, not Law-keeping
3:28	Neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female — all are one in Christ Jesus	Every status distinction that defined religious standing and social hierarchy is abolished in terms of standing before God
3:29	If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise	The conclusion: union with Christ = union with the promised seed = inheritance of the Abrahamic blessing

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	3:1–5	The Experiential Argument: The Spirit Came by Faith, Not Law
2	3:6–9	The Abrahamic Argument: Abraham Was Justified by Faith
3	3:10–14	The Curse Argument: The Law Curses; Christ Redeems
4	3:15–18	The Covenantal Argument: The Promise Precedes and Overrides the Law

Division	Verses	Label
5	3:19–25	The Purpose Argument: The Law Was a Temporary Custodian, Not the Destination
6	3:26–29	The Identity Declaration: In Christ, All Are Sons, Clothed, One, and Heirs

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Justification by faith alone in Christ alone — grounded in Abraham, fulfilled in Christ, abolishing every human distinction.

Primary Claim: God is confronting every attempt to supplement or complete the gospel with human religious performance, and calling believers to rest their entire standing — past, present, and future — in the promise fulfilled in Christ alone, which makes them full heirs of Abraham and full members of God’s family.

Applications (Five)

1. Examine what you are actually trusting for your standing before God. (*Mind/Belief*)

Paul’s rebuke to the Galatians is not that they had abandoned Christ entirely but that they had begun supplementing Him — adding circumcision, Law-keeping, and religious performance to what Christ had done. The contemporary form of this error is more subtle but no less lethal: the believer who is trusting Christ *plus* their consistency in spiritual disciplines, *plus* their doctrinal correctness, *plus* their moral track record. Galatians 3 calls for a ruthless audit — not of behavior, but of trust. Where is your confidence actually located when you stand before God in your own mind? If the answer includes anything you have done or are doing, you are in Galatia. The Primary Claim of this passage is that Christ alone, received by faith alone, is the ground of standing — and any addition to that ground is not improvement but replacement.

2. Let the curse-bearing of Christ produce genuine relief, not merely doctrinal

acknowledgment. (*Affections/Worship*) Verse 13 is not a theological data point — it is a declaration that should produce something visceral in the believer: the curse that the Law rightly pronounces over every person who has not perfectly kept every commandment was absorbed by Christ on the cross. That means the curse is gone. Spent. Exhausted on Him. Many believers know this as a proposition and feel nothing. Galatians 3 calls for the kind of encounter with the curse-bearing Christ that the Galatians originally had — so vivid that Paul describes it as Christ crucified being *publicly portrayed* before their eyes (v. 1). Return

to the cross not as a doctrine to affirm but as an event in which your curse was executed on someone else. Let that be the source of relief, gratitude, and worship — not merely assent.

3. Stop treating your spiritual progress as the measure of your acceptance.

(Will/Behavior) The Galatians were not returning to the Law because they were ungodly — they were doing it because they wanted to be godlier. The *paidagogos* metaphor (vv. 24–25) addresses this directly: the Law’s custodial era is over. It is not that discipline, obedience, and growth are unimportant — it is that they are the fruit of the inheritance, not the path to it. Practically, this means refusing to read your standing before God off of your quiet-time consistency, your sin patterns, or your progress in sanctification. These things matter enormously — but as responses to grace, not conditions of acceptance. When your standing before God rises and falls with your performance, you have rehired the *paidagogos* Paul has just dismissed. Fire him. Rest in the standing you have in Christ (v. 26) and pursue obedience from that resting place.

4. Receive the identity declaration of verse 28 as your own and live from it. *(Mind/Belief)*

“You are all one in Christ Jesus” — this is not a future aspiration or a social program. It is a present declaration about what is already true of every person in Christ. The categories that define you in the world — ethnic heritage, social class, professional achievement, gender, family background — are real, but they are not your deepest reality. Your deepest reality is that you are clothed with Christ (v. 27), a son of God through faith (v. 26), and an heir of the promise given to Abraham (v. 29). This changes how you think about yourself on your best and worst days alike. On your best day, it prevents pride — what you have accomplished does not elevate your standing; you are already fully an heir. On your worst day, it prevents despair — what you have failed at does not reduce your standing; you are already fully clothed with Christ.

5. Extend to every believer the full standing that Christ has given them.

(Affections/Worship) The social logic of verse 28 is not merely personal — it is communal and doxological. If there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female in terms of standing before God, then the church must be a community that reflects this reality visibly. The application is not primarily political — it is ecclesiological and relational. It asks: Do you treat the believer from a different ethnic background, economic class, or social status as a co-heir of the same promise? Do you honor the same Christ in them that you want honored in yourself? The church that has genuinely rested in justification by faith produces a community where inherited status markers do not determine belonging, welcome, or honor — because all standing comes from Christ, not from what any person brings.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Galatians 3 is among the most concentrated expositions of justification by faith alone in the entire New Testament, and its theological importance lies in its demonstration that this doctrine is not a Pauline novelty but the original, Abrahamic,

scriptural pattern of God's covenant dealings with humanity. Paul establishes that God's mechanism for bringing sinners into right standing before Himself has always been faith receiving promise — grace granted, not merit earned. The chapter also provides the clearest New Testament account of the Law's purpose and limitations: the Law was never designed to justify, was always temporary and custodial in its covenant function, and was always pointing beyond itself to the promised seed. Crucially, the theological center of the chapter is the cross — verse 13 — where Christ's curse-bearing is identified as the hinge event that both exhausts the Law's condemnation and releases the Abrahamic blessing. Every doctrinal movement in the chapter — experiential, scriptural, covenantal, eschatological — flows from and back to the substitutionary death of Christ.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Galatians 3 is the theological charter for the sola gratia, sola fide, solus Christus cluster of Reformation convictions. Calvin and Luther both recognized that this passage does not merely address a first-century Judaizing controversy — it addresses the permanent human tendency to smuggle religious performance back into the ground of righteousness, a tendency that finds expression in every era of church history in every form of works-righteousness, sacerdotalism, and merit-based spirituality. The chapter also displays the Reformed commitment to covenant theology: Paul reads the Abrahamic covenant as the controlling framework that precedes, encompasses, and fulfills the Sinai covenant — making the Law a parenthesis within the promise rather than the substance of God's saving purpose. The closing verses (26–29) reflect the Reformed understanding that the church is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic community — not a replacement of Israel but the ingathering of all nations into the one seed, Christ, in whom the covenant promise reaches its intended scope. The gospel is not doing something new in Galatians 3 — it is doing what was always promised, for the people who were always meant to receive it.

Main Takeaway

Christ crucified is not a starting point you graduate from — He is the entire ground, the whole inheritance, and the permanent identity of every person who belongs to Him. You are not on probation. You are not supplementing grace with performance. You are clothed with Christ, a son of God, an heir of Abraham's promise — and that is as complete as it will ever need to be. Stop adding to what Christ has already finished.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating this as merely a first-century controversy with limited contemporary application.** The danger is preaching Galatians 3 as a historical explanation of why Gentiles don't need to be circumcised, as if the stakes are simply ethnic inclusion. Paul's argument penetrates to a universal human condition: the compulsion to secure standing before God through religious performance. Every congregation contains people doing exactly what the Galatians were doing — supplementing Christ with Law-keeping in its contemporary forms (moral track record, spiritual discipline, doctrinal correctness, church membership). The preacher must name these contemporary forms explicitly; otherwise, the congregation will hear the sermon as being about someone else.
- **Preaching verse 28 as a social or political manifesto.** The temptation — particularly in a culturally heated moment — is to leverage “neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female” as a proof text for social programs, political equality, or gender egalitarianism in church office. The verse is making a specific and glorious claim about equal standing before God and equal inheritance in Christ. To collapse it into a social charter both overreads what it claims and underreads its actual glory. The expositor should hold the verse's own claim firmly and let its genuine social implications for the church community be drawn from that ground — not imposed from outside it.
- **Leaving the curse-bearing of verse 13 as a theological abstraction.** The phrase “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us” is the most explosive claim in the chapter. It is also the one most easily summarized and moved past. Preachers who treat verse 13 as a doctrinal data point to note and continue miss the pastoral and doxological weight the verse is meant to carry. The point is not that this is true — the point is that this is *staggering*, that the curse the Law rightly pronounces over every lawbreaker was absorbed by the Son of God in the act of crucifixion. This should produce something in the congregation, not merely inform them.
- **Domesticating the *paidagogos* metaphor into a merely positive account of the Law.** Some expositors, eager to honor the Law and avoid antinomianism, soften the *paidagogos* image into a picture of the Law as a nurturing schoolmaster guiding students gently to Christ. The image is not gentle. A *paidagogos* was a household slave who had authority to confine, restrain, and compel the children in his charge — not a teacher but a custodian with coercive authority. Paul's point is that the Law's era involved confinement and restriction appropriate to a pre-Christ period, and that era is over. Softening this obscures Paul's argument that the arrival of faith marks a genuinely new era of freedom from custodial constraint.
- **Failing to connect the Abraham argument to the gospel's continuity with the Old Testament.** Paul's appeal to Abraham is not merely a rhetorical strategy — it is

a claim about the nature of the Bible. The gospel is not a revision of God's prior covenant dealings; it is their fulfillment and extension. Preachers who bypass the Abrahamic section (vv. 6–9, 15–18) to get to the more immediately applicational material miss an opportunity to ground their congregation in the unity of Scripture and the single saving purpose of God across both Testaments. This matters practically: it is the ground for why the Old Testament is not obsolete for the Christian, and why Christian faith is not a departure from Israel's hope but its realization.

- **Moralistic application that contradicts the passage's own argument.** Galatians 3 is arguing against the reduction of the gospel to behavioral conformity. A sermon on Galatians 3 that lands primarily on behavioral applications ("here are five things you should do differently") commits the very error the passage is diagnosing. Applications must be grounded in the identity and inheritance declarations of verses 26–29 and must motivate from the indicative of grace rather than the imperative of obligation. The structure should be: *because* you are clothed with Christ, *because* you are an heir of promise, *therefore* — not the reverse.