

Living in a Gospel System

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Ever find yourself exhausted, down on yourself for not measuring up? Find yourself judging others for not pulling their weight? You might be living in a merit system not a gospel system. This passage shows the difference: Break the Spell, Hear with Faith, Live by Faith.

Break the Spell

Recently I visited my aunt who was hospitalized for mental illness. I have a special connection with her because I donated one of my kidneys to her several years ago. When I walked in the room she was lying motionless in the bed, eyes glazed over, and with a deadpan expression said, *Johnny, I killed your kidney. It's dead.* It was clearly untrue. *She'd* be dead if her *only* kidney failed. But she repeated it 4-5 times, believing it with all her heart. It was like her worth was tied to the care of her kidney. What would you say to her? Would you tolerate her beliefs? Beliefs producing a tremendous amount of guilt? I held her hand, kissed her, and told her I loved her, but the most important thing I did was *tell her the truth*. I insisted on it so she could be free. With great concern Paul challenged the Galatians because their beliefs jeopardized not just their *sanity but their eternity*, **O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.** The word bewitched means to cast an evil **spell**. Their belief was so strong it was like a delusion. What were they believing? They'd fallen under the spell of work for your worth. Keep the works of the law and you'll be right with God. Poison, Paul says. Don't drink it. When I was a young husband if I came home and the house wasn't clean, I'd tense up and put Robie on thin ice. She struggled to perform to my standards. Living under the spell of *work for your worth* sucks the life out of a marriage. Striving to hit the numbers, please the boss, approval for our appearance, likes for our posts, the merit system is all about us. Most religions cast the same spell: if you keep the dharma you enter Nirvana; if you follow the 5 pillars of Islam you get paradise; if you keep the works of the law you'll belong. *Work for your worth*, which is all about US. What happens when we treat Christianity like this? Get to become have to: Do I have to go to church, do we have to serve, does our city group have to multiply? Over time this produces apathy, which leads to cynicism and distrust. Why? We perceive everything through a merit system. If I'm working

for worth, then you're judging my worth by my work. That's draining relationship. How do we **break the spell**? Paul says [Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?](#) When we reduce the faith to things that have to be done, the whole thing becomes wooden and lifeless. Why? Because we've reached into the gospel and ripped out the heart—the pulsing presence and power of the Spirit. We break the spell, not by working harder but by going back to how faith began. Having *begun* by the Spirit are you *now* perfected by the flesh? We grow in holiness, thrive in marriage, serve with joy by operating on the Spirit not the flesh. How does the Spirit operate? “[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](#)—God supplies the Spirit *by hearing with faith*. To get in touch with the power of Christianity, the life-giving presence of the Spirit, we don't go into a trance, let go and let God; we *listen with faith*.

Hear with Faith

Paul gives an example from Gen 15 where Abraham struggles to believe God's promise of a son. He looks at the facts: he and Sarah have no son; they're not getting any younger. So he says, [O Lord God what will you give me](#) (1-2)? Hearing with Faith doesn't mean no questions asked. Quite the opposite asking questions can deepen faith. [sidebar] There's a way to ask questions and a way not to. Take gender roles. Headship and submission. You don't ever want to be in a situation where because of a spouse's view of the Bible, they can never be questioned. That's blind faith in them, not relationship based on trust. That's domineering rule. Instead, question Scripture together. But, you also don't want to be a person who says anywhere the Bible says something I don't like, or I think is backwards or primitive, I throw it out. That's not questioning; that's asserting from a high horse straddles God. That kind of questioning locks you into the delusion of individual infallibility. [Hearing with Faith, Abraham shows us, is questioning as though God is present](#). Questioning, *O Lord God*. You can feel the reverence. He's not snarky, shooting off. He questions God from a place of trust. He's open-minded, open to the truth. So God brings him outside and says look at the stars and number them. So shall be the number of your descendants; I will give you an heir. God makes a *promise* to Abraham. He puts it on display, writes in in the sky,

and says, Trust me. And you know what? Abraham trusted him and it was credited to him as righteousness. Abraham questioned God reverently *and* trusted his promises. That's how you hear by faith. God looks at his faith and fills up his account with righteousness. So now, whenever God looks at Abraham, flaws and all, he glances over at his account and sees it full of righteousness. He recognizes a worth Abraham could never achieve on his own. We could never achieve but is utterly necessary. But when we put our faith in Jesus, we gain a worth we could never achieve. God looks at us, flaws and all, with the righteousness of Christ. Merit says work for your worth; prove yourself. Gospel says *trust for your worth*. Where is the gospel with Abraham? Paul writes, [And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed."](#) Abraham believed the promise preached to him, in you all the nations be blessed. How was that the gospel? God says "in you" meaning in your posterity, in your seed as Paul will argue later, there's immense blessing. Where does that come from? The Gospel of Matthew traces the line of Abraham, ["The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham \(Mt 1:1\).](#) Jesus is Abraham's son, the promised heir who brings blessing to the world, who replaces the merit system with the gospel system: not *work for your worth; trust for your worth*.

Live by Faith

Break the spell of proud performance by the power of the Spirit. *Hear with faith* by trusting God's promises. Finally, *live by faith*. But first we have to reconsider the alternative, [For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse.](#) Turns out the merit system does more than wear you out. It kills you. Live by works and you die by the curse. You get what you pay for. Paul quotes the end of Deuteronomy, the conclusion to the Law, which says if you *rely* on works you die a cursed death. This may seem regressive and cruel, but that's because we've evolved both positively and negatively. Positively, No punishment by the state should be cruel and unusual. Negative evolving, the state is but a dim shadow of justice. We see it every week. What we're dealing with here isn't the state. What stands behind the Law is true Justice, who weighs humanity with pure vision and omniscient scales, *and no one is found righteous not one*. All are cursed. It says anyone who misleads a blind person, perverts justice, dishonors a parent, or worships a false god is to be hung on a tree and

cursed. Hanging on a tree is sign of the divine curse. When Adam and Eve eat from the wrong tree, they're cursed. When Absalom usurps David's anointed place as king, no one will touch him but when his hair gets caught in a tree David's men pounce on him. Why? Sign of divine curse. When Saul is slain by the Philistines, they place his head on a tree. Why? To invoke the curse. Worth by works is an eternal death. But, [the righteous shall live by faith](#). Faith in what? Jesus who is hung on a tree, *who innocently bears the divine curse in our place*. Jesus liberates us from working for worth, and the curse that goes with it. *He bears our curse and pleads our righteousness*. Here is the utter uniqueness of Christianity, of living in a gospel system. We don't have to carry the cargo of our own worth or suffer the curse for falling short. When truly believe that, when it gets into our bloodstream, the Spirit prompts faith in the promise: we work, not for our worth, but from our worth. We become so enamored with the Christ portrayed as crucified, his love written in the sky, carved into the trunk of a tree, that we grow in holiness, thrive in relationships, serve with joy. Finally, after talking with my aunt for quite time, I said to her: I don't care what you did with my kidney, what I care about is you. I love you, that's why I gave myself to you. And this is why Jesus gave himself for us! Trust *him* for your worth.