

Threats To Christian Freedom: Legalism
Part 8

TEXT: GALATIANS 5:2-12

November 6, 2011

INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:

Last time, we asked the question, “What is a Christian?” It is easy to just assume that everyone knows what a Christian is. However, we saw that this is certainly not the case. The debate over this question continues to remain prominent in the public square thanks to the Republican Presidential primary and the possibility of electing the first practicing Mormon president, Mitt Romney. Two recent examples stemming from this debate highlight the need for a correct understanding of this question.

First, Richard J. Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, recently wrote an op-ed for CNN’s Belief Blog entitled, “My Take: This Evangelical Says that Mormonism Is Not a Cult.” Dr. Mouw seems to be arguing for the technical meaning of the term “cult.” Arguing for the technical meaning of “cult” is one thing. But, the troubling part of Dr. Mouw’s article is when he writes, “So are Mormons Christians? For me, that’s a complicated question... While I am not prepared to reclassify Mormonism as possessing undeniably Christian theology, I do accept many of my Mormon friends as genuine followers of the Jesus whom I worship as the divine Savior.”

Such slippery language at best is not helpful and at worst is terribly misleading and dangerous- particularly for the ordinary reader who is unaware of the critical distinctions between Mormonism and orthodox Christianity. Regarding the definition of the term “cult,” Walter Martin writes, “Doctrinal aberration should distinguish the cults from Christianity, not merely social aberration” (*The Kingdom of the Cults*, p. 55). Thus, it seems best to define a cult as “a group of people gathered about a specific person or person’s misinterpretation of the Bible” (Martin, p. 17).

In addition to Dr. Mouw, Joel O’Steen recently conducted an interview with editors and reporters at *The Washington Times*. In the interview, O’Steen expressed his disagreement with Robert Jeffress (pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, TX) who said that former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney is “not a Christian” because he is a Mormon. Osteen explains,

“I believe that [Mormons] are Christians,” Mr. Osteen said. “I don’t know if it’s the purest form of Christianity, like I grew up with. But you know what, I know Mormons. I hear Mitt Romney — and I’ve never met him — but I hear him say, ‘I believe Jesus is the son of God,’ ‘I believe he’s my savior,’ and that’s one of the core issues.

“I’m sure there are other issues that we don’t agree on. But you know, I can say that the Baptists and the Methodists and the Catholics don’t all agree on

everything. So that would be my take on it”
(<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/oct/24/osteen-faith-at-all-time-high/>).

Our purpose this morning is not Presidential politics (which has no place in the church) and neither is it to provide an apologetic to refute Mormonism. If you are interested in a book that offers a responsible critique of Mormonism, I recommend Ron Rhodes’ book, *The 10 Most Important Things You Can Say to a Mormon* (Note: He also wrote the essay on Mormonism in back of the *ESV Study Bible*).

The purpose of these two examples is to illustrate how great the need is for us to be clear on what a Christian is. What then is a Christian? What does it really mean to be a Christian? In Galatians 5:5-6, Paul gives us the answer.

Before he answers in the positive, Paul answers in the negative. He does so by issuing a warning against the destructive consequences of legalistic doctrine (vv. 2-6).

I. PAUL WARNS AGAINST THE DESTRUCTIVE CONSEQUENCES OF LEGALISTIC DOCTRINE. (VV. 2-6).

Specifically, Paul warns of three negative consequences for anyone who seeks to earn salvation by works (i.e., theological legalism).

- A. Christ will be of no benefit in the final judgment. v. 2
- B. Become a debtor to God’s Law. v. 3
- C. Severed from Christ. v. 4

Implied in these negative consequences is what a Christian is not. If a Christian is not one someone of whom Christ is of no benefit in the final judgment, if a Christian is not a debtor to the law, if a Christian is not severed from Christ and fallen from grace, what is a Christian? In contrast to these negative consequences, Paul mentions 4 characteristics of a true Christian in vv. 5-6. Verses 5-6 summarize the essence of the gospel and bring together the three most important graces that characterize a true Christian (i.e., faith, hope and love). With this context in mind, let’s see how Paul characterizes a Christian. By way of review, we saw last time that...

1. A TRUE CHRISTIAN LIVES BY THE SPIRIT. V. 5A

Paul begins, “For through/by the Spirit...” The Holy Spirit is primary fact of Christian existence. A Christian, Paul says, lives by virtue of the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit rather than by “by the law” (cf. v. 4). Paul is contrasting the Spirit (v. 5) with the flesh (v. 4). A legalist relies upon and lives by the flesh (vv. 2-4). In contrast, a Christian doesn’t put any confidence in the flesh (reliance upon works for God’s approval). Rather, a Christian lives by the Spirit, which is a way to say a Christian lives

by faith (i.e., receives and rests in Christ alone for God's approval). This leads to the second characteristic of a Christian.

2. A TRUE CHRISTIAN LIVES BY FAITH. V. 5B

The whole Christian life can be summed up in this phrase, "by faith". Paul is arguing that a true Christian lives by faith in Christ rather than by confidence in works (contrast with vv. 2-4). The Holy Spirit causes us to put our trust in Christ alone rather than rely on our own effort. This is a gracious, supernatural work of the Spirit. By the Spirit, a Christian possesses a firm and certain knowledge of God the Father's goodwill towards him or her. This certain knowledge is founded upon the truth of the gospel (i.e., the freely given promise in Christ). Such a certain knowledge (faith) of the Father's goodwill in Christ produces hope. This leads us to a third mark of a true Christian.

3. A TRUE CHRISTIAN LIVES WITH HOPE. V. 5C

Paul writes, "For through/by the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for *the hope of righteousness*" (emphasis mine). Hope is the fruit of justifying faith. It is a settled confidence; a certainty of things promised in the gospel. A Christian, by the Spirit, eagerly waits with hope—confident expectation—for God's final vindication (i.e., God's final public verdict of the righteousness already received by faith). By the work of the Spirit, the Christian has no fear or expectation of God's future condemnation (cf. Rom. 8:15). Instead, because of his Spirit-wrought faith, the Christian lives with a confident expectation of God's final vindication. This leads us to the fourth characteristic of a Christian.

LESSON:

4. A TRUE CHRISTIAN IS MARKED BY LOVE. V. 6

Paul writes, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only *faith working through love*" (emphasis mine).

Verse 6 functions as the basis for verse 5 (see Schreiner, *Galatians*, p. 317). In other words, the believer's final public vindication of righteousness is not granted on the basis of works but through faith alone. The flesh cannot produce righteousness. The only righteousness that conforms to and fulfills the requirements of God's law comes from the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, when it comes to justification before God, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts before God (i.e., outward religious observances/ceremonies or abstaining from them).

Paul, again in 6:15, writes, "For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation." In other words, what counts before God is the gracious, miraculous, freedom-giving work of God rather than the legal, natural, enslaving work of man. The Judaizers have no advantage because they are circumcised.

And the Galatians have no advantage (or disadvantage) because they are uncircumcised. What counts for a Christian in terms of his standing before God is not what he does (circumcision) or doesn't do (uncircumcision). Instead, what really counts is whether a person is in union with Christ by faith alone—a faith that is evidenced by love.

Do you see what Paul is saying here? Through faith alone, the Holy Spirit gives the Christian nothing less than Christ Himself. By faith, we are united to Christ, which means both that He lives in us and we are united with Him. His life is our life. His death is our death. His resurrection is our resurrection. His righteousness is our righteousness. The Father's pronouncement—"This is My Beloved Son in whom I am well pleased"—is also our pronouncement as the Father's adopted Sons. If you are in union with the Beloved Son, God the Father is well pleased with you as His adopted son (cf. Gal. 4:6-7). Christ's ascension—His seating at the right hand as Head of the church—is a sure pledge that He—our Head, will also take us—His members—up to Himself (see *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. 49).

What then is a Christian? Simply put, a Christian is one who through the Spirit by faith comes into union with Christ therefore everything else is inessential (i.e., circumcision or uncircumcision)!

The phrase, "in Christ Jesus" makes all the difference for the Christian. Union with Christ is the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation (see John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, p. 161). In Book 3 of his *Institutes*, John Calvin takes up the subject of the way in which we receive the grace of Christ and what benefits come to us and what effects follow. Calvin begins, "First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from Him, all that He has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us" (3.1.1.).

The believer's identity is not bound up in what he does or doesn't do but rather in his union with Christ. Those who live by law have their identity bound up in the flesh. In contrast, those who live by the Spirit and faith have their identity bound up in Christ. Michael Horton writes, "All of our righteousness, holiness, redemption, and blessing is found outside of us--in the person and work of Christ" see: <http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/questions/horton/union.html>).

Faith brings us into union with Christ who is our righteousness. Paul writes, "because of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). Paul shows here that union with Christ is not something we achieve based on what we do or don't do (cf. "by the law," v. 4; circumcision or uncircumcision). Rather, the Holy Spirit brings a Christian into union with Christ through the gospel and faith (cf. *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. 53). Calvin notes that it is by the secret energy of the Spirit that a Christian lives and comes to enjoy Christ and all His benefits (*Institutes*, 3.1.1.). "The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to Himself" (*Institutes*, 3.1.1.). Apart from the work of the Spirit, Calvin rightly notes that the gospel's promise of salvation would only "strike the air or beat upon our ears" (3.1.4).

Even as believers, we must pray for the continual work of the Spirit to overcome our unbelief, ignorance and darkened, limited understanding of the gospel. In Ephesians 1:18-19, Paul prays that believers will comprehend the blessings that are theirs in Christ. By faith—which is the principal work of the Spirit—the Holy Spirit leads us into the light of the gospel to receive and rest in Christ alone—the sole object of faith (3.1.4.). True faith never looks to works as the basis for one’s standing before God. True faith always turns away from oneself and receives and rests in Christ alone for righteousness.

And so it is through the believer’s legal and vital faith union with Christ that all other graces/fruit in the Christian life follows—particularly love. Paul writes, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, *but only faith working through love*” (emphasis mine).

Some have misinterpreted this passage to support that idea that we are justified by love (i.e., works). For example, the Council of Trent misinterprets this passage as teaching “faith formed by love” (*fides caritate formata*, see *Session 6, ch. 7*). By this phrase Roman Catholic dogma means that faith through its expression of love cooperates in producing salvation, which is the way in which one is made righteous (see Ridderbos, *Galatians*, pp. 190-191, footnote 18 for additional information).

Paul, however, has clearly taught throughout this letter that “justification” by the merit of works is legalism. No one keeps the law in order to be saved (e.g., 2:16; 3:21). Christ has brought us freedom from the bondage of the covenant of works (“Do this and live.”). Paul nowhere teaches that love is the basis of justification. Love is not a means to an end—love doesn’t save you. Love never precedes faith. Faith always precedes love. Love—like hope—is the fruit of faith, the result of faith (e.g., Gal. 5:22). Justification is by faith alone but not by a faith that is alone.

We need to remember, Paul is not only refuting legalism but also license—antinomianism (he is anticipating his refutation of license in vv. 13-24). Both legalism and license are threats to the truth of the gospel and the Christian’s freedom. It could be that the Judaizers falsely accused Paul that by preaching justification through faith alone, he was minimizing love as the fulfillment of the law—giving a license to disregard the law of love (see Ridderbos, *Galatians*, pp. 190-191). Paul, however, refutes any such notion.

Paul clearly shows that justifying faith produces the fruit of love, which is the spiritual fulfillment of the heart of God’s law (cf. 5:14)—something the Mosaic Law could not accomplish. Such a genuine faith in Christ then is not an empty faith. All who are justified receive the Holy Spirit (Gal. 3:2). In Romans 5:5, Paul says God’s love has been poured through the Holy Spirit into the hearts of all who have been justified. Therefore, genuine justifying faith expresses itself through love. F.F. Bruce writes, “...the faith by which believers are justified is the faith which operates through love...” (*Galatians*, p. 233). Love is the *modus operandi* [the manner of working-J.F.] of faith (see Alford, *The Greek Testament*, vol. 3, p. 54).

A true Christian then is one who possesses a *living* faith rather than a *dead* faith (cf. Jam. 2:17). Faith is NOT a work but it is never without works. Love is the primary fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). We have been saved in order to do good works (Eph. 2:10). So, “justification” by the merit of works is legalism. But, on the other hand, “justification” apart from the existence of works is license.

Paul makes it clear that the only kind of faith that truly justifies is a working faith. Calvin writes, “Indeed, we confess with Paul that no other faith justifies ‘but faith working through love’ [Gal. 5:6]. But, it does not take its power to justify from that working of love. Indeed, it justifies in no other way but in that it leads us into fellowship with the righteousness of Christ” (*Institutes*, 3.11.20.).

God has freely justified us not to give us the license to sin all we want. Rather, we have been justified in order to fulfill the Law, which is to love one another (cf. Gal. 5:13-14). Love is the fulfillment of the law (see Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.11.10.). The evidence of genuine faith and union with Christ is love. The keeping of God’s commands (i.e., love) is the consequence of faith (5:6) and of being a new creation (6:15). When believers are justified they immediately receive the Holy Spirit (Gal. 3:2, 14). Thus, justification and life in the Spirit (sanctification) are like two sides of the same coin; neither is present without the other (see Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 233). All who do not express love and obey God’s commands demonstrate they do not possess genuine saving faith and that they are not part of God’s new creation (cf. 1 Jn. 2:3-4; 4:7-8).

The believer’s faith union with Christ produces and motivates good works through love. So, to be clear, a Christian doesn’t work for righteousness but out of righteousness. Our standing before God in justification doesn’t depend upon love. Rather, genuine justifying faith expresses itself in love. Luther writes, “He says that works are done on the basis of faith through love, not that a man is justified through love” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 27, p. 28). A Christian then is one who by faith has come into union with Christ and this faith union expresses itself in love. Martin Luther writes,

“...Paul is describing the whole of the Christian life in this passage: inwardly it is faith toward God, and outwardly it is love or works toward one’s neighbor. Thus a man is a Christian in a total sense: inwardly through faith in the sight of God, who does not need our works; outwardly in the sight of men, who do not derive any benefit from faith but do derive benefit from works or from our love” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 27, p. 30).

REFLECTION:

As we reflect on this fourth characteristic of a Christian, the application may perhaps be different than you think. Often when we hear sermons about the Christian life as a life of love, the “application” almost always defaults into a list of “practical” exhortations on how to be a more loving Christian. Out of a desire to be “practical” and “relevant” pastors and Christian leaders offer believers a set of “practical” techniques to live the Christian life. But, a loving life is not the product of a set of techniques. If you want to

become a loving person, it doesn't come by trying to implement techniques on how to become a more loving person. This solution only makes you become preoccupied with your self-effort at trying harder to be more loving.

In reality, trying to follow techniques to be a loving person is really nothing more than a veiled self-righteousness—a preoccupation with self—which undermines true Christian love! So, this approach actually makes you more self-centered and driven by guilt. In his book, *Good News of Anxious Christians: 10 Practical Things You Don't Have To Do*, Philip Cary explains,

“...people who really try to do everything out of love are driven by guilt, not love. Think about it: a sermon on how you have to do everything out of love doesn't really leave you much choice. Either you believe you're rising to the challenge and doing everything out of love, which makes you obnoxiously self-righteous and deeply deceived, or else you realize you're not doing everything out of love, and therefore you try really hard to be more loving—and in that case your fundamental motivation is to avoid feeling like you're being unloving. And that's why I say you're driven by guilt” (p. 86).

Trying harder to be more loving turns our attention back on ourselves, which ironically makes us unloving. Why? We become more unloving because our attention is focused on ourselves rather than our neighbor! Preoccupation with our efforts at being more loving actually keeps us from loving our neighbors! As long as the center of our attention is ourselves and the love we are trying to find deep down in our hearts, we will remain unloving (see Cary, *Good News For Anxious Christians*, pp. 87-88). But, when the gospel invades our life, the Holy Spirit begins to drive us out of an inward-oriented love for ourselves and into an outward-oriented love for others!

As we think then about the grace of love, the question is not how is my love and what do I have to do to be more loving? *Rather, the question is how is my faith?* A lack of love in our lives is either due to a dead faith—see James or 1 John—or a weak and sluggish faith.

How then do you become more loving? You become more loving by faith—continually believing—not by simply trying harder to implement a set of techniques. Fruit—love—flows from faith. Faith comes by hearing the Word of Christ—the gospel—over and over again (cf. Rom. 10:17).

Paul has shown us that a Christian is one who lives by faith rather than simply tries harder. Our love for one another flows from being continually persuaded of God's Fatherly love for us. This is John's point in 1 John 4. For example, he writes, “We love *because He first loved us*” (emphasis mine, 1 Jn. 4:19). We cannot give what we have not received (or better are continually receiving).

Faith is a persuasion of God's Fatherly love and goodwill toward us in Christ, which is deeply rooted in our hearts through the Spirit by faith. A heart continually filled with the justifying love of God in Christ will in turn overflow in love toward others. The “key” to

expressing love is to have one's faith immersed in the waterfall of the grace of God as freely given in the gospel.

So, if I realize my life is not as loving as it should be, I must first seek to reorient my faith back to Christ (repent!) and then soak my heart in the gospel and then step out in obedience and love toward my neighbor. Hence, our faith needs the gospel as much as fruit needs the living root of a tree (see Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.31.). Again, Philip Cary offers valuable insight when he writes,

“At the center of God’s word is the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, which is to make us glad. God gives us that good word not just to convert us and make us Christians to start with, but to strengthen us all along the way to eternal life, giving us what we need for the whole journey. The gospel is meant to make us cheerful, because the Christian life is a life of love, which gets us involved in a great deal of hard work and heartache, as we share the sufferings and sorrows of our neighbors and even our enemies. So our obedience to God’s commandments would be a crushing burden if it were not supported by the love of Christ—by which I mean our Lord Jesus’ love for us, including all that He has done for us and for our salvation, as announced and revealed in the gospel. When we believe that good news, we have strength for the journey” (p. xviii).

What we need most week after week is for the word of Christ—the gospel—to make its way into our hearts and engrave itself a little deeper each week, so that Christ Himself may dwell in our hearts by faith.

Again, Cary observes,

“It [the ministry of the church-J.F.] transforms people, not by giving them life-changing experiences but by repetition, continually telling the story of Christ so that people may hear and take hold of Him by faith. For we do not just receive Christ by faith once at the beginning of our Christian lives and then go on to do the real work of transformation through our good works. We keep needing Christ the way hungry people need bread, and we keep receiving Him whenever we hear the gospel preached and believe it. So what transforms us over the long haul is not one or two great life-changing sermons (although these can be helpful from time to time) but the repeated teaching and preaching of Christ, Sunday after Sunday, so that we never cease receiving Him into our hearts” (*Good News For Anxious Christians*, p. 133).

The effect of such a continual deeper pressing of the gospel into our hearts over a lifetime is slowly but surely a more loving life. Gospel repetition is the true, ongoing means of transformation of the heart, which results in faith expressing itself through love.

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