

THREATS TO CHRISTIAN FREEDOM: LEGALISM

PART 11

TEXT: Galatians 5:2-12

November 27, 2011

INTRODUCTION/REVIEW

- I. PAUL WARNS AGAINST THE DESTRUCTIVE CONSEQUENCES OF LEGALISTIC DOCTRINE (VV. 2-6).
- II. PAUL EXPOSES THE DEPRAVED DISPOSITION OF LEGALISTIC TEACHERS (VV. 7-12).

Verses 7-12 serve as an implicit exhortation to resist all false teachers who seek to introduce legalism into the church. To aid in resisting legalistic teachers, Paul exposes their depraved disposition by setting forth six characteristics of legalistic teachers.

A. HINDER OBEDIENCE, V. 7

“You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?”

B. NOT FROM GOD, V. 8

“This persuasion is not from Him who calls you.”

God doesn't call you by grace and then drive you like a slave in order to obey! This kind of persuasion hinders obedience and does not come from the God who calls sinners by grace. If left unchecked, such a legal persuasion will corrupt the church.

C. CORRUPT THE CHURCH, V. 9

“A little leaven leavens the whole lump.”

Paul quotes a familiar Proverb to illustrate how legalism is like leaven. Just as a pinch of leaven eventually spreads throughout the whole loaf, so just a dose of legal doctrine will eventually end up corrupting the whole church. All of the trouble facing the Galatians came from one subtle yet corrupting error (i.e., Christ plus circumcision = justification instead of Christ alone).

This leads us to a fourth characteristic of legalistic teachers.

LESSON:

D. CONDEMNED BY GOD, v. 10

“I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is.”

Verse 9 ended with a negative statement (i.e., legalistic teachers corrupt the church). Now, in v. 10, Paul’s outlook makes a dramatic shift. He trusts in the fact that God—who called the Galatians in the grace of Christ, Gal. 1:6—who began a good work in the Galatians would be faithful to complete it (cf. Philip. 1:6; 3:15). We will come back to Paul’s confidence in Christ later.

For, now, we note that in contrast to the Galatians (true believers) legalistic teachers will not escape judgment (cf. 5:2, 5). Unlike a true Christian who will experience God’s final verdict of vindication (5:5), legalistic teachers will experience God’s final verdict of condemnation on the Last Day (5:10b).

It is important to note here how much God disapproves of the corrupting effect that legalistic teachers have upon the church. Jesus issued a similar warning in Matthew 18:6-7. He warns,

“⁶ ...whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. ⁷ “Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!”

In 1 Corinthians 3:17, Paul warns, “If any man destroys the temple of God (i.e., the church), God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.”

God dearly loves the church. Christ paid the ultimate price for His people (Acts 20:28; Rev. 5:9). In Ephesians 1:18, Paul says the church is Christ’s inheritance—His prized possession. Paul’s prayer reveals how loved and valuable the church is to Christ. The people Christ has redeemed are what He looks forward to enjoying forever, which is why we will enjoy Him forever.

Lach—my Vizsla—is a faint picture of the gospel (well-not really but the analogy works!). Lach is fond of me and you just can’t keep hanging around someone who really likes and enjoys you without growing to like and enjoy him or her back. Paul said it like this in Galatians 2:20, “...the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

Precisely because Christ loves His people and gave Himself for them, God stands as a Judge against those who “trouble” (τράσσων, 1:7; 5:10) the church with legalistic teaching and thereby hinder people from obeying the truth of the gospel.

To “trouble” means to bring spiritual unrest and confusion into the church concerning the way of salvation (see Ridderbos, *Galatians*, p. 193). In v. 12, Paul uses an even stronger word to characterize false teachers. The word is “unsettle” (ἀναστατόω), which means to “upset the stability of a person or group, to disturb.” For example, in Acts 21:38 Luke uses the same word to refer to the time when Paul is mistaken for an Egyptian who “stirred up” (ἀναστατόω) a political rebellion of 4000 assassins. These assassins (“dagger men” (σικάρριος) terrorized Roman sympathizers by stabbing them under the cover of crowds (see *ESV Study Bible* notes on Acts 21:38). Paul’s point is that when the law and gospel are combined, legalistic teachers greatly disturb men’s souls by undermining their faith in Christ.

For example, we saw last week how nothing is more soul-destroying to those who are already burdened and troubled by their sin than to be persuaded that the accusing and condemning voice they hear is the voice of Christ. The convicting work of the Holy Spirit does not drive us away from Christ and deeper into ourselves. Rather, the convicting work of the Holy Spirit drives us to repentance and faith in Christ.

Christ, Paul says, came into the world to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15) not to condemn them (cf. Jn. 12:47). In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus said He came to comfort the despairing and to proclaim freedom to those who are enslaved, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Lk. 4:18). Through the gospel, God has called us to rest in Christ for righteousness rather than to restlessly strive to earn it by our own works. God has called us to clarity rather than confusion. God has called us to freedom rather than slavery.

Legalistic teachers then are a threat to Christian freedom because they distort the truth of the gospel and enslave men under the crushing demands of the law (1:7). They sow confusion, disturb the believer’s assurance and peace, and create spiritual unrest in the church. Paul states that anyone (“whoever he is”) who is guilty of such things will “bear the penalty” (βαστάσει τὸ κρίμα, a legal decision rendered by a judge, judicial verdict).

All who insist on people bearing the crushing burden of God’s law now will in turn have to bear the crushing burden of God’s verdict on the last day (cf. 1:8-9). No one will be spared, regardless of how influential and popular he or she may seem. All who introduce destructive, legalistic teaching in the church will bear God’s judgment on the last day.

E. PERSECUTE BELIEVERS, v. 11

“But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed.”

It appears that the Judaizers started a rumor among the Galatians that Paul was still preaching circumcision but doing so in a hypocritical manner. Paul—they falsely slandered—was a people pleaser (Gal. 1:10). He preached circumcision when it suited his audience. For example, when Paul took the gospel to the synagogues, he would follow the Jewish traditions and so he had Timothy circumcised (cf. Acts 16:3). However, the reason for Timothy's circumcision was sociological—removing unnecessary obstacles—rather than theological—a way of gaining God's approval.

Timothy would have been considered a Jew because his mother was Jewish. But, his father was a Greek and would not have circumcised Timothy according to Jewish customs. For Paul to take along an uncircumcised Jew into a Jewish Synagogue would have unnecessarily hindered his ministry. So, Paul had Timothy circumcised in order to eliminate this unnecessary obstacle for ministry in the Jewish community (the principle of accommodation, cf. 1 Cor. 9:20).

In addition to Paul's principle of accommodation, he also had a policy of indifference when it came to circumcision (Gal. 5:6; 6:15; cf. 1 Cor. 7:18-19). For Paul, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision mattered. As long as circumcision was not being demanded for salvation, Paul was not opposed to it as a cultural practice. What mattered to Paul was insisting that circumcision was necessary for salvation; a means of justification/of gaining God's approval. Thus, whenever Paul was in a context where circumcision was being made a requirement for salvation, he opposed it (e.g., Titus in Jerusalem, Gal. 2:1-5).

Paul, no doubt, preached the necessity of circumcision in his former life in Judaism when he persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it (Gal. 1:13-14). But, now persecution is coming to him as a result of preaching a law-free gospel. Paul could back this up from his own experience when he first brought the gospel of grace and freedom to the Galatians. In Acts 14:19-20, Luke reports how Paul was stoned and left for dead for preaching the gospel in Lystra—a province in southern Galatia.

Paul implies here in v. 11 that if he included just a pinch of law (leaven) in his gospel, he would be exempt from persecution. This is exactly what the Judaizers were doing out of a desire to avoid persecution (cf. 6:12). And so he asks, "If I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed."

Here is Paul's point: Persecution proved that he did not preach circumcision. The gospel is offensive because it insists that salvation is by grace rather than works. Legalistic teachers nullify the offense of the cross because they seek to establish righteousness based on human ability. If Paul preached the necessity of circumcision for salvation the offense of the cross would be removed and he would not be persecuted.

Legalism—in all forms—removes the offense of the cross. The word, “offense” (σκάνδαλον) literally means a “stumbling block.” In 1 Corinthians 1:23, Paul says, “...we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block (σκάνδαλον) to Jews and folly to Gentiles.” The cross is an offense to both Jews and Gentiles.

First, to the Jew, the offense of the cross lay in the curse which was pronounced in the Law on anyone who was hanged on a tree (cf. Gal. 3:13; Deut. 21:22-23, “²² “And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, ²³ his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.”).

For a Jew in Paul’s day, it was utterly unthinkable that the Messiah would die and that He would die such a cursed death under the Law. Thus, the central fact of the gospel—Christ’s becoming a curse on the cross, Gal. 3:13—served as the greatest offense (i.e., a crucified Messiah) to the Jew.

Second, to the Greek, the offense of the cross lay in its apparent foolishness and absurdity. To the Romans, the cross represented the most gruesome and reprehensible form of death. The Roman government didn’t even allow its citizens to be crucified and eventually the Latin word *crux* became a swear word (see Philip Ryken, *Galatians*, p. 214).

Still today, the cross is offensive to the unbelieving Gentile. For example, in a debate with Doug Wilson, the renowned atheist Christopher Hitchens states,

“Many of the teachings of Christianity are, as well as being incredible and mythical, immoral. I would principally wish to cite the concept of vicarious redemption, whereby one's own responsibilities can be flung onto a scapegoat and thereby taken away. In my book, I argue that I can pay your debt or even take your place in prison but I cannot absolve you of what you actually did. This exorbitant fantasy of "forgiveness" is unfortunately matched by an equally extreme admonition—which is that the refusal to accept such a sublime offer may be punishable by eternal damnation” (Christopher Hitchens, “Is Christianity Good for the World?” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/mayweb-only/119-12.0.html>).

Ultimately, whether it is a 1st Jew or a Roman Gentile or a 21st century Gentile, the real offense of the cross lay in the fact that it cuts away the ground of any possibility of personal achievement or merit in relation to salvation. Nothing is more offensive to the fallen heart of man than telling him that he cannot pull himself by his own bootstraps.

All self-boasting is excluded by the Gospel (Eph. 2:9). Faith is a self-emptying, Christ-exalting grace! *The Belgic Confession* in Article 22 states that true saving faith embraces Christ with all His merits and makes Him its own, and no longer looks for

anything apart from Christ (see Belgic Confession, Article 22: The Righteousness of Faith). *The Westminster Larger Catechism* states in Q. 155, “The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ....” Walter Marshall in *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* writes, “This is the doctrine which glorifies God, and abases the creature; which is a mark of its truth,” (p. 136). To the unbelieving Jew and Gentile the word of the cross is a stumbling block. It is utter folly. But, for the Christian, the cross is the power and wisdom of God for salvation (1 Cor. 1:18, 24).

As long as Paul preached circumcision (Christ plus) he was safe. But, as soon as he preached the gospel of grace (Christ alone) he was persecuted. Tom Schreiner writes,

“If righteousness comes by the law, then the goodness of human beings is celebrated and promoted. The cross, however, rejects any and all human attempts to be right with God. Righteousness is found only in what Christ Jesus has done for sinners. The message of the cross is a scandal or a stumbling block because it is an affront to human pride. Human beings take umbrage in being told that even their best works are stained with evil, that everything they do is insufficient to be right with God, and that the only basis for right standing with God is the cross of Jesus Christ” (*Galatians*, p. 327).

Sixth and finally, Paul characterizes legalistic teachers as promoters of paganism.

F. PROMOTERS OF PAGANISM, V. 12

“I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!”

Bruce Longenecker says that Paul’s final description of his opponents contains “the crudest and rudest of all Paul’s extant statements” (*Galatians*, p. 234). Tom Schreiner describes Paul’s exclamation as shocking (*Galatians*, p. 327). To be sure, his language and tone is severe and reminiscent of the imprecatory Psalms (cf. Ps. 35, 109, 137).

Paul likens the Judaizers insistence of circumcision to the practice of pagan priests. In Paul’s day, pagan religions—such as the cult of Attis—practiced sacred rites of castration. While in a state of raving madness, the priests of Cybele in Northern Galatia would castrate themselves and drink their own blood in order to assure themselves of the favor of the gods (see Ridderbos, *Galatians*, p. 195; George, *Galatians*, p. 371).

Paul is saying in effect: The Judaizers who were demanding circumcision for the obtaining of God’s approval were just as much promoters of paganism as the pagan priests who castrate themselves. In fact, Paul says whoever seeks to gain God’s favor

by circumcision shouldn't just go half way. They should at least follow the example of the pagan priests and go all the way!

In Galatians 4:8-9, Paul made a similar argument where he compares desiring to live under the Mosaic Law for salvation as a form of paganism! So, whether it is a pagan priest who practices castration to appease the gods or a legalistic Judaizer who demands circumcision for salvation, the underlying, enslaving error is the same: "Do this and live." Herman Ridderbos remarks, "Such a mutilation of the gospel stands for Paul on one and the same level as the most despicable pagan practices, by means of which men tried to assure themselves of the favor of the gods" (*Galatians*, p. 195).

Paul is graphically stating that legalistic teachers are mutilators of the gospel. Just like the priests, legalistic teachers turn people into pagan idolaters. Thus, in the end, there is no difference between legalistic teachers in the church and pagan priests who practice sacrificial castration. Both promote idolatry; both issue enslaving demands that bring people into bondage rather than freedom.

REFLECTION:

As we reflect on these final three characteristics of false teachers, there are three insights we can gain concerning how to respond to and combat false teachers in order to protect the church.

1. WE MUST UNDERSTAND WHAT IS AT STAKE.

Paul, no doubt, was undergoing severe persecution and public slander by the false teachers. But, we must understand that his severe language was neither a vengeful retaliation—a personal response to a personal offense—nor an angry outburst wishing physical harm on others.

Paul's severe and shocking language must be understood out of his passionate desire to keep the truth of the gospel free from all legalistic additions, which distort and corrupt the truth of the gospel.

What was at stake was the truth of the gospel (2:5, 14; 5:7), the justification of sinners (2:16), the sufficiency of Christ's substitutionary death (2:21), and the freedom of the Christian (5:1). In short, ultimately what was at stake was the glory of God in the salvation of sinners (Gal. 1:5). Concerning Paul's severe language in v. 12, Calvin writes,

...devout minds are sometimes carried beyond the consideration of men, and led to fix their eye on the glory of god, and the kingdom of Christ. The glory of God, which is in itself more excellent than the salvation of men, ought to receive from us a higher degree of esteem and regard. Believers earnestly desirous that the glory of God should be promoted, forget men, and forget the world, and would rather choose that the whole world should perish, than

that the smallest portion of the glory of God should be withdrawn (*Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 21, "Galatians," p. 157).

Paul had been saved and commissioned by Christ to proclaim the life giving freedom of the gospel. The Judaizers, however, had "cut in" on his converts and were distorting the purity of the gospel and thereby hindering them from "running well" (obeying). A distorted gospel led to an enslaving legalism and licentious living. Therefore, Paul confronts both threats head on in order to preserve the truth of the gospel and thereby guard the sinner's justification and freedom and promote the glory of God.

2. WE MUST PREACH THE GOSPEL CLEARLY.

The best way to fight against false teaching is to preach the gospel clearly. Paul shows us that what people need most who are enslaved to a crushing legalism or rebellious license is a clear gospel. Only a clear gospel can assure a troubled heart and only a clear gospel can empower an indifferent heart.

3. WE MUST ASSURE THE SAINTS CORRECTLY.

Paul's statement of confidence in v. 10 is quite remarkable. His strong warning and severe language is balanced by this word of assurance. Despite the spiritual disaster of the Galatians, Paul expresses confidence that they will persevere in their salvation.

Note that his confidence is "in the Lord" rather than in the Galatians. Despite the grave news concerning the Galatians, Paul is confident that God will continue to preserve the Galatians by grace to the end (cf. Phil. 1:6).

If left to ourselves, we would surely perish. Even believers are not entirely free from sin. In fact, believers may even at times fall into serious, grievous sin for a season (e.g., David, Peter, Galatians). But, the good news of the gospel is that even though a Christian may for a time fall into serious sin, he or she cannot and will not abandon themselves completely to sin because of the powerful, effectual working of God's grace and Spirit. The Lord graciously restored David (cf. Ps. 32, 51) and Peter (cf. John 21). Article 6 in the *Canons of Dort* states,

"God, who is rich in mercy, according to His unchangeable purpose of election does not take his Holy Spirit from His own completely, even when they fall grievously. Neither does He let them fall down so far that they forfeit the grace of adoption and the state of justification, or commit the sin which leads to death (the sin against the Holy Spirit), and plunge themselves, entirely forsaken by him, into eternal ruin" (*Canons of Dort, Article 6, The Perseverance of the Saints*).

The Lord not only converts by grace but also continually preserves by grace to the end all who He has called by grace, as Paul writes in Rom. 8:30, “those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified.” Paul speaks of glorification as if it were already completed, since God always finishes the good work that He starts (cf. Phil. 1:6; Jude 24). Thus, instead of condemnation, Paul is confident in the Lord that the Galatian’s outcome will be one of vindication on the Last Day (cf. 5:5). Such a wonderful truth provides comfort for those who may have a wayward child or relative or friend. And so like Paul, we trust in the Lord who strengthens His own and in His time graciously restores wayward believers once again (Jn. 21:17) and rescues them from the present evil age (1:4).

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