

LISTEN TO THE LAW!
PART 3

TEXT: GALATIANS 4:21-31

June 5, 2011

INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:

God helps those who help themselves, right?

Listen to the findings of George Barna in a 2003 survey comparing the beliefs of those who claimed to be born-again and not born-again. Barna reports,

“Among non-born-again, 75% claimed that the Bible teaches that God helps those who help themselves (53% strongly agreed, 22% agreed somewhat). Among those who claimed to be born-again, 68% agreed that the Bible teaches that God helps those who help themselves.”

Barna affirms this finding in his book, *Growing True Disciples*, where he reveals that the most widely known “Bible” verse among adult and teen believers is “God helps those who help themselves!”

In response to the survey Barna wrote,

“The fact that most adults, born again or not, believe the Bible teaches that God helps those who help themselves shows how post-modern thinking is gaining ground, even in churches. That belief exposes our theological cornerstone – that we are the center of all things, that it is up to us to determine our destiny, and that God is merely our assistant, not our foundation.”

While the findings of Barna’s survey are quite revealing, they are not surprising. Though the Judaizers are dead and gone, their conditional gospel is alive and well. This well-known slogan is nothing more than a modern form of the Judaizer’s conditional gospel.

That God is merely our assistant and not our foundation gets to the heart of the problem in Galatians. The conditional gospel of the false teachers did not deny Christ or faith in Christ. Rather, their false gospel simply added works along with faith. In other words, Christ was an assistant not the foundation.

Benjamin Franklin actually coined this well-known slogan. The philosophy, “God helps those who help themselves,” resides in the core of every fallen heart. Self-salvation (Pelagianism/Semi-Pelagianism) is our default setting.

Pelagianism is the natural religion of humanity. In the early 5th century, Pelagius—a British monk—taught that all humans are born free of sin and able to choose good and receive eternal life or sin and receive eternal death (see Michael Horton, *The Christian*

Faith, p. 561). Semi-Pelagianism maintains that human beings are affected by sin but can still choose the good. The common slogan of the medieval period was “God will not deny His grace to those who do what lies within them” (this slogan is repeated substantially in Benjamin Franklin's famous saying, “God helps those who help themselves,” *Ibid*, p. 561).

The natural drift our hearts is to believe that we are basically good people who could be a little better with the right moral advice and life-coach. This is why so many Evangelical preaches today sound more like Oprah and Dr. Phil than Peter or Paul in the books of Acts. In contrast to this man-centered philosophy, the Bible teaches that God saves those who cannot save themselves.

Listen to Timothy George concerning Paul’s analogy in 4:21-31,

The birth of Ishmael was the result of the outworking of the philosophy that God helps those who help themselves. Both Abraham and Sarah were childless in their old age, and it appeared that they would die that way. So they decided to “help God” fulfill His promise. The result was the birth of Ishmael, who was a source of contention and suffering for the rest of his life. Then fourteen years later God’s promise was at last fulfilled in the birth of Isaac (*Galatians*, p. 338).

In our study of Galatians, we have seen how the Galatian believers had surrendered their freedom in Christ for slavery under the law. They believed it was necessary to get circumcised, to refrain from certain foods and to keep the Passover or other Jewish feasts all in order to prove that they were genuine Christians (the true descendants of Abraham). Simply put, the Galatians were being tempted to reduce Christianity to a list of “do’s and don’ts” and thereby seeking to “help” God fulfill His promise (like Abraham and Sarah with Hagar).

Therefore, in order to motivate the Galatians to abandon their desire (4:21, θέλοντες) to be the under law (Do this and live) and to live in the freedom of the gospel, Paul appeals to a lesson from the Law (Torah) itself.

Specifically, Paul sees from the story of Hagar and Sarah in Genesis an analogy, which illustrates the spiritual truth he is teaching (i.e., all who rely on self-effort end up in sin and bondage whereas those who trust in God’s promise receive salvation and freedom).

He divides his analogy from the Torah into three sections: The Historical Basis of the Analogy (vv. 21-23); The Spiritual Meaning of the Analogy (vv. 24-27); The Personal Application of the Analogy (vv. 28-31).

In v. 21, he begins with an authoritative question to the Galatians in v. 21, “Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?” In other words he is saying to the Galatians, “If you truly understood what the Torah teaches, you would know that it teaches you to trust in God’s promise rather than in your own-self effort! Therefore, listen to the law!”

In vv. 21-23, Paul sets forth the historical basis of his lesson (analogy).

I. SECTION 1: THE HISTORICAL BASIS OF THE ANALOGY (VV. 21-23)

- A. PAUL'S QUESTION, v. 21
- B. PAUL'S ARGUMENT, VV. 22-23
 - 1. TWO SONS, v. 22A
 - 2. TWO MOTHERS, v. 22B
 - 3. TWO BIRTHS, v. 23

Paul appeals to the book of Genesis and the life of Abraham (specifically the births of Ishmael and Isaac). The historical account in Genesis begins with God promising to make Abraham a great nation when he was childless and old in age (75; Gen. 12:4-5).

Moreover, Sarah was barren. For years, she prayed for a child but remained childless. Finally in desperation and impatience, Sarah says to Abraham, "Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai" (Gen. 16:2; Note: Abram should have trusted in the promise—voice—of the LORD).

As a result of their unbelief, Hagar conceived and bore a slave son, Ishmael (Gen. 16). The birth of Ishmael came about as the result of the philosophy, "God helps those who help themselves."

Yet, despite their adultery and unbelief, God in grace had not forgotten His promise to Abraham. 14 years later (when Abraham was 100!), God fulfilled His promise and Sarah gave birth to Isaac (Gen. 21:1-3).

Having rehearsed the historical facts of the births of Ishmael and Isaac in vv. 21-23, Paul, in vv. 24-27, employs these facts as an analogy to illustrate two antithetical approaches to religion (i.e., law versus grace, flesh versus Spirit, self-effort versus divine dependence)

II. SECTION 2: THE SPIRITUAL MEANING OF THE ANALOGY (VV. 24-27)

In vv. 24-27, Paul speaks of two antithetical covenants (or two covenantal arrangements taught in the Law (Torah):

- A. THE SPIRITUAL MEANING OF HAGAR, VV. 24C-25

Hagar represents a covenant of law established at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19-20);

- B. THE SPIRITUAL MEANING OF SARAH, VV. 26-27

Sarah represents a covenant of promise established with Abraham 430 years prior to the Mosaic Covenant (cf. Gal. 3:17; Gen. 15).

Confusion of these two covenants lay at the heart of the Galatian heresy and was the cause of the Galatians' "trouble" (1:7). These two covenants operate on two mutually exclusive principles:

- (1) A principle of law (i.e., personal performance);
- (2) A principle of promise (i.e., inheritance of an estate by virtue of the performance of another).

Paul's analogy demonstrates the difference between spiritual slavery and spiritual freedom. All religions (spiritual slavery) are based on a covenant of law and live by the principles, "Do and live," or "I obey therefore I am accepted." This approach sees God as our debtor who owes us and it leads to bondage and slavery.

In contrast, a covenant of promise (spiritual freedom taught in both OT and NT) operates on the principles, "Live, now do," or "I am accepted therefore I obey." This approach sees God as a gracious benefactor and it leads to salvation and freedom.

In his book, *The Gospel Commission*, Michael Horton points out how Christians do not live in a debt economy but rather a gift economy (p. 215). Children of promise are not owners of an estate but rather heirs of an estate (*The Gospel Commission*, p. 215). We are not debtors to grace or mercy.

This is why I don't like the line in the hymn, "Come Thou Fount" which says, "Oh! To grace, how great a debtor, daily I'm constrained to be" (see Michael Horton, *People and Place*, p. 299). Debt, Horton demonstrates, is the wrong counterpart to grace (p. 299).

You and I can never be debtors to grace. Paul writes in Rom. 11:35-36, "35 who has given a gift to Him that He might be repaid?" 36 For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen."

In Galatians, Paul has shown how we were once debtors to the law (Gal. 3:10). But the good news is that Christ has redeemed us from the debt we owe to the demands of the law (Gal. 3:13)! In Christ, we are justified apart from works of the law (Gal. 2:16).

If you are "in Christ" then you are not in a debt relation to God at all! Christ, Paul writes in Colossians 2:14, "has canceled the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross."

What then is the appropriate correlate to grace? How are we to respond to the good news Paul sets forth in this passage?

REFLECTION:

1. FAITH IN CHRIST ALONE.

Last week, the first response was to answer the question, “Who is your mother?” To which of these two mothers do you belong? Are you seeking to be justified before God by your own self-effort (Hagar)? Or, are you looking to Christ’s performance on your behalf alone for your justification (Sarah)?

2. A LIFE OF GRATITUDE AND REJOICING.

Second, we not only respond with faith in Christ alone but we also respond in gratitude. Gratitude—not debt—is the proper correlate to grace.

Giving of thanks rather than repayment of debt is the only appropriate response to grace. In Romans 12:1, Paul says it is in view of the mercies of God (indicative/gospel) that we are to present ourselves in gratitude as “a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1).

The gospel of freedom created in Paul a spirit of thankfulness and rejoicing. Phil Ryken writes, “Whenever Paul thought about the joy of freedom in Christ, he burst into song...” (*Galatians*, p. 188). In v. 27, Paul appeals to Isaiah’s prophecy, which is a call to rejoice! The link between Israel and Sarah is “barrenness.” Isaiah says to Israel in exile,

“Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband” (Isa. 54:1).

This is amazing! Isaiah says to the barren woman—Israel in exile—to rejoice! What kind of exhortation is this? The pain of infertility can be crippling. Couples some times pray for years for a child and yet remain childless. How then can Isaiah call on the barren woman to rejoice? Isn’t this cruel?

Indeed it would be cruel if not for this reason: The glory of the gospel is that it gives whatever the law demands! The gospel is a powerfully creative word (2 Cor. 4:6). The Spirit creates the reality that the gospel announces! Paul is telling us here that what the law was powerless to do (Gal. 3:21) and we are powerless to keep (Gal. 3:10), God has done by promise by His Spirit and grace!

Life under the law creates despair. Life under the law creates a debt economy where worshippers are constantly reminded of their sin (“...in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year” Heb. 10:3; see Horton, *People and Place*, pp. 298-299).

In distinction, life under the gospel (in Christ) creates rejoicing! The reason it creates rejoicing is because the worshipper comes to understand that Jesus alone has offered a perfect sacrifice for sin (Heb. 10:4-10; *Ibid*, p. 299).

This assurance alleviates all thoughts or feelings of debt in relation to God! Now, for the first time in your life, you are free—free to love God and your neighbor!

And, so what Paul is teaching us in this passage is that our hope and joy is found not in our ability but in the fact that we have a promise-keeping God! Knowing that we are the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham—the true, adopted children of the Lord—should cause us to exult with joy! Believers in Christ—children of promise—are the children of the barren woman from whom no children were expected (i.e., Sarah). We—like Isaac—are miracles of grace!

Sarah was barren and Abraham was 75 when God made him a promise and he was 100 when the promise was fulfilled. The author of Hebrews in 11:11-12 writes, “¹¹ By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. ¹² Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

Don't miss what the author of Hebrews says. Sarah was “past the age.” Nonetheless, “she considered him faithful who had promised.” Abraham was “as good as dead.” Nonetheless, because God was faithful to His promise and descendants as many as the stars of heaven and the innumerable grains of sand came from one man! Eventually, Christ—“the offspring, Gal. 3:16—was born and fulfilled the promise made to Abraham.

So, just like the birth of Isaac, Paul is emphasizing that we are miracles of grace. We have been brought to life supernaturally by the Holy Spirit (Gal. 4:29). The only proper response to such an act of divine grace is to respond in gratitude with rejoicing.

Thus, Paul bursts forth in spontaneous joy and issues a call to believers,

“Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.”

This brings us to the Lord's Supper this morning. This sacrament reminds us that we are not debtors but heirs! We come not with fear but thanksgiving because this sacrament doesn't remind us of our sin that isn't taken away (Heb. 10:3). Rather, at the Lord's Table we are reminded and assured that Jesus alone has offered a perfect sacrifice for our sin and thus has brought to an end any notion of debt in relation to God!

The Lord's Supper is not a “Do this and Live” covenant arrangement with God! Rather, the Lord's Supper is a “Live, now do this” covenant arrangement with God. It is not a Suzerainty Treaty (Mosaic Covenant) but rather a Royal Grant (Abrahamic/new covenant).

At the Lord's Table we do not serve but rather are served. We are not givers but receivers. This sacrament tells us that we are not in a debt economy but a gift economy.

The Lord's Supper is God's gift to us rather than our gift to God (see Michael Horton, *The Gospel Commission*, p. 178). We come to this table with thanksgiving precisely because there is no debt that we owe to God.

The preaching of the gospel truly delivers Christ to us and the Lord's Supper guarantees that we are truly united to Christ and that all the blessings of the gospel are true for us! Michael Horton writes, "The King comes with banners unfurled, proclaiming peace to His enemies and delivering pardons embossed with royal seals" (*The Gospel Commission*, p. 178).

Let us then remember that we are coming this morning not to serve but rather be served. For, Jesus said "the Son of Man—Lord and Servant—came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28; cf. Dan. 7:13-14).

The essence of the Christian faith and life is not measured by our devotion to Christ but rather His endless devotion to us! We love Him because He first loved us! Woven throughout the story of the Bible is the thread of God's loyal devotion to His promise to His people. Psalm 136 celebrates it: "Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever." Through Jesus, God's steadfast love is given to us beyond measure! All of His promises are Yes in Christ that is why we respond with our Amen to God for His glory (2 Cor. 1:20)!

In Jesus, we most fully see the steadfast love of God (i.e., His unending loyal devotion and pursuit of us—unworthy sinners!). The Lord's Supper continually reminds you that Christ wants you to receive and enjoy all the promises of the gospel. Therefore, He graciously adapted to our small capacity and gave us visible and tangible signs of His favor toward us "in Christ."

What a great gift this is in light of those too frequent moments when we are acutely aware of our sins and failures (e.g., when Peter betrayed Christ!). In 1 Corinthians 11:23, Paul reminds says that Christ appointed the Lord's Supper on the night when He was betrayed. This is hopeful news to us!

The purpose of the Lord's Supper is to put us in constant remembrance of the benefit of His death on our behalf (1 Cor. 11:26). Thus, despite our frequent failures in sanctification (like Peter's betrayal), we may assure ourselves:

- that we do possess eternal life,
- that we do have entrance into the Kingdom of God,
- that we can no more be cut off from God than Christ,
- that we cannot be condemned for our sin because Christ has been condemned in our place (Gal. 3:13).

- that we have confident access to God that will never be closed (Rom. 5:2; Eph. 2:18; 3:12).

- that Christ has taken our sin, our unrighteousness upon Himself and clothed us with his righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21).

The Lord's Supper is an invitation to believers to "Taste and see that the Lord is good. Blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him," (Ps. 34:8). How can all of this be true despite our frequent failures? The answer is because the essence of the Christian faith and life is not determined by our devotion (half-hearted at it is!) but rather Christ's endless devotion to us! It is not about our self-effort and performance but rather His promise and grace!

Let us then come to the Lord's Supper this morning with great faith and thanksgiving, looking away from ourselves trusting only in the perfect merits and finished work of Christ alone for our acceptance before God—who saves those that cannot save themselves.

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