

THREATS TO CHRISTIAN FREEDOM: LEGALISM
PART 2

TEXT: GALATIANS 5:2-12

September 18, 2011

INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:

By way of review, in 5:1, Paul exhorts the Galatians to stand firm in their freedom. Now, beginning in vv. 2ff, Paul warns the Galatians of two dangerous threats to their standing firm in freedom: *legalism* (vv. 2-12) and *license* (vv. 13-24).

We learned last week that we are always faced with the ever-present threat of diminishing the law (legalism) or dismissing the law (license). Both legalism and license are forms of self-justification. Legalists seek to justify themselves—establish their own righteousness—by diminishing God’s law. Legalists diminish the requirement of God’s law far below what it actually demands by constructing their own standards of righteousness that they can measure up to. By relying upon these diminished standards legalists gain a sense of approval, worth, identity and value apart from Christ.

Licentious people also seek to justify themselves—establish their own righteousness—by dismissing God’s law. Licentious people dismiss God’s standards and live according to their own value system—“I’m going to do what I want” in order to gain a sense of approval, worth, identity and value apart from Christ.

In the end, Walter Marshall points out that, “Legalism turns people into lawless people, because they do not have Christ living in them! They have no power to obey” (*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, p. 9). Thus, both legalism and license share a common flaw, namely both are inherently self-centered. Augustine pointed out that ever since the Fall our natural tendency is to be “curved in on ourselves.” Our inborn tendency is to establish and trust in our own righteousness, whether it is in the form of legalism (performance) or license (rebellion).

Paul, however, shows us that the gospel is the answer to both errors. The gospel frees us from our self-centeredness—our idols of unrighteousness. The gospel calls us outside of ourselves to look to Christ alone who is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom. 10:4). So, to keep us from falling prey to either threat and to help us stand firm in the freedom given to us through Jesus, Paul issues a warning against legalistic doctrine in vv. 2-6 and then he exposes the depraved disposition of legalistic teachers in vv. 7-12.

LESSON:

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

In vv. 2-6, Paul sets forth three disastrous consequences that would result if the Galatians submitted to the legalistic doctrine of the Judaizers (i.e., let themselves be circumcised). All three of these negative consequences grow out of Paul's theological arguments from 2:16-5:1, which establishes the reasoning for his warning and the seriousness of the issue. First, Paul warns the Galatians that if they submit to circumcision Christ will be of no benefit to them in the final judgment.

A. CHRIST WILL BE OF NO BENEFIT IN THE FINAL JUDGMENT. V. 2

In the context, the verb “will benefit/profit” (ὠφελήσει) refers to the final judgment (cf. Gal. 5:5; see Betz, *Galatians*, p. 259). Also, the Greek construction of v. 2 indicates that when Paul wrote these words, the Galatians had not yet submitted to this “yoke of slavery” (see Schreiner, *Galatians*, p. 315; George, *Galatians*, p. 357). Thus, Paul is issuing a warning to the Galatians (and us!) that if they do submit to the demand of circumcision, the consequence will be that Christ will be of no benefit at the final judgment. This raises several important points.

FIRST, THE REAL ISSUE THREATENING THE GALATIANS WAS NOT CIRCUMCISION- THE MERE PHYSICAL ACT CF. GAL. 5:6; 6:15).

For example, Jesus was circumcised (Lk. 2:21). Paul was circumcised (Philip. 3:5). Paul voluntarily had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3). The key word is voluntarily. Unlike Titus in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:3), no one forced Paul to circumcise Timothy for salvation. If having an uncircumcised Jew with him in the synagogues would place unnecessary obstacles to his gospel witness, then Paul would gladly have Timothy circumcised (cf. 1 Cor. 9:19-23).

The issue threatening the Galatians was wholly different. The Judaizer's demand for circumcision was the external ritual symbolizing the Galatians' acceptance of Judaism (Betz, *Galatians*, p. 258). Having been saved from one form of “Do this and live” religion (paganism, Gal. 4:9), they are now faced with the threat of coming under another “yoke of slavery” (Judaism). Circumcision, then, represented submitting once again to a “Do this and live” requirement for salvation.

Circumcision—as we saw last week—was a sign and seal of the righteousness one receives through faith (Rom. 4:11). But, the Judaizers had remodeled it and turned it into a meritorious work necessary for salvation. Therefore, Paul warns that submitting to any form of works righteousness automatically results in Christ being of absolutely no profit at all—both now and in the final judgment.

SECOND, THE UNDERLYING ISSUE PAUL IS ADDRESSING IS THE SUFFICIENCY OF JESUS CHRIST FOR SALVATION.

Paul is exhorting us to content/satisfy ourselves with Christ alone—with His works, merits, satisfactions and righteousness (cf. Perkins, *Galatians*, p. 330). The subtle yet destructive nature of the Judaizer's false gospel was this: faith alone in Jesus was not

sufficient for salvation. The Judaizers professed to believe in Jesus yet by adding the requirement of circumcision, they minimized and neutralized Him. They robbed Christ of His sufficiency by placing additional requirements on a level with Him as necessary for salvation.

However, for Paul there is no middle ground. One cannot trust in circumcision and Christ at the same time. By demanding circumcision plus Christ, the Judaizers divided salvation between Christ and works, grace and law. This grounds half of salvation upon Christ and half upon one's own works—which is totally incompatible with grace.

A whole salvation cannot be gained from a half Christ. John Calvin writes, "Whoever wishes to have the half of Christ, loses the whole" (*Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 21, p. 148). William Perkins notes, "...He must be a perfect Savior, or no Savior: he admits neither partner nor deputy in the work of our redemption. And the grace of God admits no mixture or composition with anything that is of us. Grace is no grace, unless it be freely given every way" (*Galatians*, p. 329). A divided Christ is a denied Christ—He is of no benefit unless He is solely embraced.

Why is a half Christ of no profit? Lightfoot writes that the reason Christ will be of no benefit is because, "He who willingly and deliberately undergoes circumcision, enters upon a compact [agreement-J.F.] to fulfill the law. To fulfill it therefore he is bound, and he cannot plead the grace of Christ; for he has entered on another mode of justification (*Galatians*, p. 203).

Paul has already stated in Galatians 2:21, "if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose." In Galatians 3:12 Paul quotes Leviticus 18:5 and writes, "...the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them." In Romans 10:5, Paul again refers to Leviticus 18:5 and writes, "For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them."

Legalism shifts the ground of one's standing before God from Christ's perfect righteousness to man's imperfect righteousness (or in this case a deadly mixture of both). Even as believers, our good works in sanctification have no bearing upon our standing before God. We are NEVER accounted righteous before by what we do, NEVER! We are not to find or base our sense of approval, worth, identity and good standing with God on the basis of our good works. John Calvin writes,

In Christ we have boldness and access with confidence through...faith in him [Eph. 3:12 p.] This surely does not take place through the gift of regeneration (i.e., sanctification- J.F.), which, as it is always imperfect in this flesh, so contains in itself manifold grounds for doubt. Therefore, we must come to this remedy: that believers should be convinced that their only ground of hope for the inheritance of a Heavenly Kingdom lies in the fact that, being engrafted in the body of Christ, they are freely accounted righteous. For, as regards justification,

faith is something merely passive, bringing nothing of ours to the recovering of God's favor but receiving from Christ that which we lack" (*Institutes*, 3.13.5).

THIRD, WE SEE FROM PAUL'S WARNING THAT JUDGMENT AWAITS ALL WHO FAIL TO RECEIVE AND REST IN CHRIST ALONE AS THEIR SOLE GROUND OF RIGHTEOUSNESS BEFORE GOD.

The subject of eternal judgment has taken center stage in recent days in light of Rob Bell's newest book, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. In his book, Bell sets out to address one of the most controversial issues of faith—would a loving God send people to eternal torment forever...?

Bell concludes that the everlasting judgment to which Jesus refers is actually "a period of pruning' or 'a time of trimming,' or an intense experience of correction" (p. 91). Again, Bell writes, "Restoration brings God glory; eternal torment doesn't" (p. 108). He states that everlasting punishment just "isn't a very good story" (p. 110). According to Bell, "Many have refused to accept the scenario in which somebody is pounding on the door, apologizing, repenting, and asking God to be let in, only to hear God say through the keyhole: 'Door's locked. Sorry. If you had been here earlier, I could have done something. But now, it's too late'" (p. 108).

Contrary to this last assertion by Bell, the Scriptures actually reveal that many have refused to accept such a scenario, namely Noah's neighbors! Furthermore, the narrative account in Genesis states that it was God who shut the door (Gen. 7:16). Moreover, Jesus uses the Flood narrative in His warning of judgment in Matthew 24:37-39.

But, according to Bell, ultimately God's love wins, thus subordinating all of God's attributes to love. Underlying Bell's theology is kind of implicit religious pluralism, a belief that truth is all-inclusive. But, truth by definition is exclusive! Clearly we gather from Paul in 5:2 that all religions are not equal and that the Christian message presents an exclusive truth claim that includes a final judgment upon all those who rely in some way on a religion of works righteousness. William Perkins, commenting on Paul's statement in Galatians 5:2 writes, "...here we see that it is false that every man shall be saved by his religion: for he that is abolished from Christ, is quite of the favor of God. And therefore no religion, but that which is truly Christian, saves" (*Galatians*, p. 334).

Ravi Zacharias in his book, *Jesus Among Other Gods*, writes,

All religions are not the same. All religions do not point to God. All religions do not say that all religions are the same. At the heart of every religion is an uncompromising commitment to a particular way of defining who God is or is not and accordingly, of defining life's purpose. Anyone who claims that all religions are the same betrays not only an ignorance of all religions but also a caricatured view of even the best-known ones. Every religion at its core is exclusive" (p. 7).

Love doesn't win, at least not in the way that Bell suggests. According to Paul, the saving work of Christ cannot benefit anyone who relies on a "Do this and live" religion of works righteousness. There is no middle way. Paul unequivocally states that the fate of those who reject or in this case supplement Christ with their own works is eternal judgment (cf. Gal. 1:8-9).

Christ will be of no benefit in the final judgment to anyone who fails to receive and rest in Him alone for salvation. Instead of receiving Christ's vindication (Gal. 5:5), legalists will receive His condemnation (Gal. 5:2). So, contrary to Bell, the gates are forever shut and there is never again an opportunity for those who choose hell to join in the celebration (pp. 114-15).

The New Testament letters are replete with warnings of escaping God's coming wrath and final judgment (Rom. 1:8; 2:2-5; 5:9; 9:22-24; 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10; Eph. 2:3; 5:6; Col. 3:6; 1 Thess. 5:1-11; 2 Thess. 1:7-10; Heb. 9:27; 10:27; 2 Pet. 2:9; 3:1-13; Jude 1:6). Yet, Bell doesn't address these warnings in his book—including Paul's warning here in Galatians 5:2!

Concerning the importance of justification in view of the final judgment, Calvin writes, "...we profit nothing in discussing righteousness unless we establish a righteousness so steadfast that it can support our soul in the judgment of God. When our souls possess that by which they may present themselves fearless before God's face and receive his judgment undismayed, then only may we know that we have found no counterfeit righteousness" (*Institutes*, 3.13.3). If there is no final judgment, for what reason then are we declared just in God's courtroom? Justification simply makes no sense if there is no final judgment.

We are now living in the "proclaimed Kingdom"—the age of the Spirit and grace. Today is the day of salvation not judgment. In making an urgent appeal to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 6:2, Paul quotes Isaiah 49:8 and reminds them, "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold now is the day of salvation." Right now, the powers of the age to come are breaking into this present evil age through the Spirit's conviction of sin and gift of forgiveness and new life in Christ (see Horton, *The Gospel Commission*, pp. 93-94). Right now, God receives sinners and holds out great patience and mercy toward them—so much so that Peter says scoffers ridicule and mock the idea of Christ's Second Coming in final judgment (2 Pet. 3:3-7).

For now, both sheep and goats graze together in the age of God's grace and forbearance. But, there is coming a day when His grace and patience will come to an end. In Matthew 25:31, Jesus says that the Son of Man will come "³¹...in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. ³² Before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." In 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10, Paul states that Jesus will be

⁷...revealed from heaven with His mighty angels ⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the

gospel of our Lord Jesus.⁹ They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might,¹⁰ when He comes on that day to be glorified in His saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.”

It is necessary that the Lord Jesus should inflict vengeance/judgment on those who do not know God (Gal. 4:8) not only for our salvation but also for His glory (see *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 21, p. 317). The reason God is glorified not only in salvation but also judgment is because what is at stake in the threat of legalism is not only our salvation but also the sufficiency and glory of Christ (Gal. 1:5, 24; 2:21; 6:14). Jesus will not share the glory of His merits and saving grace with anyone! If then Christ is glorified, then we can be justified. However, if Christ is minimized or neutralized by the addition of works—circumcision—then He profits us nothing and God is justly glorified in His condemnation of all who are unrighteous.

REFLECTION:

Unmistakably, we see from Paul that the consequences of legalism are fatal. Paul says that those who choose to follow the path of legalism—“do this and live”—receive no benefit from Christ at the final judgment. The worst thing imaginable that could happen to you would be for Christ to be of no benefit to you—especially at the final judgment.

At the final judgment, instead of your Savior, Jesus will be your Judge. The standard for His final judgment is His law, which requires 100% obedience for your justification. His final pronouncement will not be graded curve. There will only be two grades given out—100% or 0! Christ will be of no benefit to those who seek to establish their own righteousness. Instead He will say, “...depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matt. 7:23).

Our primary problem is not that we feel guilty. Our primary problem according to the Scriptures is that we are guilty, whether we feel like it or not. The fact is that all of us are already presently under God's righteous judgment and face a holy and righteous Judge. Jesus, in John 3:18, declares, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but *whoever does not believe is condemned already*, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (emphasis mine).

Every man is born in a cell on death row with the sentence of condemnation already having been pronounced! Since you have failed to measure up to everything His law requires, all you can expect is the carrying out of the Judge's final sentence of death. To those who trust in their own righteousness, the only thing left—writes the author of Hebrews—is “a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries” (Heb. 10:27). This is the final outcome that we can all expect unless there is some Mediator greater than we who intervenes for us.

Since God's law requires that the same human nature that has sinned should make satisfaction for sin, this Mediator must be a true and righteous man who has not sinned but kept God's Law in its entirety—since a sinner cannot make satisfaction for others. Furthermore, this man must also be true God so He is able to bear in His manhood the burden of God's wrath and judgment against sin in order to obtain for and restore us to righteousness and life. This perfect Mediator, who in one person is both true God and a righteous man, is Jesus Christ. The gospel announces to us that He has been freely given to us for perfect redemption, righteousness and freedom (see *Heidelberg Catechism*, Questions 12-19).

The gospel announces to us that because Jesus was born "under law" (Gal. 4:4) our righteousness has been attained. And because Jesus became a "curse for us" (Gal. 3:13), our unrighteousness has been atoned for. Because of Jesus' work for us we are free from God's righteous judgment both now and in the future. Through faith in Christ alone, we can confidently stand before God without fear of His condemning judgment. Samuel Bolton writes, "...none of our sins shall condemn us or bring wrath upon us, Christ interposes Himself between us and wrath, so that no one shall be able to condemn us" (*The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, p. 23).

The Apostle John writes these assuring words of the gospel, "⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins...¹⁷ By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world" (1 Jn. 4:9-10, 17). Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 5:9, succinctly reminds us, "God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Therefore, in light of such Good News, keep standing firm in your freedom from God's final judgment and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery so that Christ will be of no benefit to you.

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