

THREATS TO CHRISTIAN FREEDOM: LEGALISM
PART 3

TEXT: GALATIANS 5:2-12

September 25, 2011

INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:

In our study of Galatians 5:2-12, we have learned how Paul is seeking to keep us from falling prey to the threat of legalism (license being the second threat in vv. 13-24).

To help us stand firm in the freedom given to us through Jesus, he begins in vv. 2-6 by issuing a solemn warning against the destructive consequences of legalistic doctrine (and then in vv. 7-12, he exposes the depraved disposition of legalistic teachers).

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

In vv. 2-6, Paul warns of three destructive consequences that would result if the Galatians submitted to the legalistic doctrine of the Judaizers (i.e., relying on the law plus Christ for salvation and thereby renouncing Christ). We saw last week that the first destructive consequence of legalism is that Christ is rendered of no benefit in the final judgment (5:2).

The consequences Paul issues in 5:2-6 constitute some of the gravest warnings in this letter. Consequently, they are to be taken with utmost seriousness. Therefore, it is critical for us to understand the purposes of warning passage like this and how they are intended to function.

First, in seeking to understand Paul's solemn warning against legalism, we need to distinguish between two differing types of legalism. I have termed the two differing types theological legalism and functional legalism. We will consider theological legalism first and next time we will explore functional legalism.

LESSON:

A. THEOLOGICAL LEGALISM

What is theological legalism? Generally speaking, *theological legalism refers to trusting in any form of works righteousness for one's standing before God*. In other words, your obedience/goodness/good works will gain you eternal life/salvation. Theological legalism applies to any number of works-based religions such as Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hinduism, Islam, etc... It is important to note that there are different forms of theological legalism. First, there is a strict theological legalism.

1. STRICT THEOLOGICAL LEGALISM

Historically, strict theological legalism is known as Pelagianism. Pelagianism derives its name from Pelagius, a 5th century British monk who was an opponent of Augustine. Pelagius strongly opposed Augustine's famous prayer, "Command what thy will; and give what thy command." Pelagius—who was a legalist and moralist—believed that Augustine's doctrine of grace led to a life of license.

Pelagius denied that human nature has been corrupted by the Fall. He taught that Adam only left us a bad example. Every human being is born like Adam before the Fall, namely free to choose good and gain eternal life or sin and suffer eternal death (Horton, *Systematic Theology*, p. 561). Grace is not essential for salvation (i.e., "getting in"). So, for example, Pelagius maintained, "Nature was created so good that it needs no help" (Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 5, ch. IV, p. 194). Since all men are essentially good they are capable of doing what is necessary for salvation. He believed if man "ought" then he "can." Every person has the power within himself or herself to become righteous simply by choosing to obey God's commandments. Concerning the teaching of Pelagius, Adolf Harnack writes, "...self acquired virtue is the supreme good which is followed by reward. Religion and morality lie in the sphere of the free spirit; They are won at any moment by man's own effort (Harnack, p. 173).

Pelagianism is the natural religion of the fallen human heart. It is based on a "pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps" theology of salvation. B.B. Warfield wrote, "There are fundamentally only two doctrines of salvation: that salvation is from God, and that salvation is from ourselves. The former is the doctrine of common Christianity; the latter is the doctrine of universal heathenism" (*The Plan of Salvation*, p. 33 quoted in Michael Horton, "Pelagianism: The Religion of Natural Man" <http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/pelagiannatural.html>).

Thanks to the work of Augustine, the church condemned Pelagius as a heretic at the Council of Ephesus in 431. In fact, Pelagianism—along with variations—have been condemned by more councils than any other false teaching (e.g., the Council of Orange, the Council of Florence, the Council of Carthage, and even the Council of Trent in the first three anathemas of the Canons of the Sixth Session).

An example of Pelagianism in American church history is Charles Finney (19th century), whose ministry and writings have heavily influenced the Evangelical church in America. Most Evangelicals are surprised to learn that Finney denied original sin, the substitutionary atonement of Christ and that regeneration depends on the supernatural gift of God. Moreover, Finney declared justification to be "another gospel" (see Michael Horton, "Pelagianism: The Religion of Natural Man").

Finney held that our choices make us either good or sinful. He taught that to tell a sinner that he must first have his constitution recreated before he can possibly do anything but oppose God is "the most abominable and ruinous of all falsehoods. It is to mock [the sinner's] intelligence" (*Finney's Systematic Theology*, p. 226).

Over against strict theological legalism is a moderate form of theological legalism, which is the threat Paul opposes in Galatians.

2. MODERATE THEOLOGICAL LEGALISM

The moderate form of theological legalism that characterized First Century Judaism is referred to as covenantal nomism. E.P. Sanders first coined this term in his famous book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977). According to Sanders, covenantal nomism is "...the view that one's place in God's plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression" (p. 75).

Unlike strict theological legalism, covenantal nomism maintains that "getting in"—becoming part of God's covenant people/sons of Abraham—is a matter of grace but "staying in" as a member of God's covenant people is dependant on one's obedience to Torah—Mosaic covenant (see Sanders, pp. 75, 236). Covenantal nomism then teaches that you "get in" by grace but "stay in" by works.

Biblical scholars such as Sanders, James Dunn and NT Wright—the "new perspective on Paul"—are correct in characterizing first-century Judaism as "covenantal nomism." The problem, however, is in attempting to reconcile Paul with covenantal nomism over against the evangelical, Reformational reading of Paul. In response, Peter O'Brien has written a very helpful essay responding to scholars such as Sanders and Wright showing that Paul was not a covenantal nomist (i.e., that he did not retain the structure of grace and obedience found in covenantal nomism, see "Was Paul a Covenantal Nomist?" in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 2, pp. 249-296).

To be sure, covenantal nomism is not a strict theological legalism like Pelagianism. Nevertheless, it is equally destructive and is precisely the threat that Paul opposes in Galatians. In Galatians 3:3, Paul asks (rebukes) the Galatians, "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?"

The "Galatian heresy" Paul is warning against didn't deny Jesus or grace. Rather, as we have learned, the Judaizers simply added additions to Christ as necessary for salvation (cf., Acts 15:1). It is not that faith in Christ was wrong but that it just wasn't sufficient. What Christ began by grace had to be finished and perfected by one's obedience to the commandments, if one wanted to remain in the covenant community. This more subtle, moderate form of legalism is what made the Judaizer's "false gospel" (1:6) so deadly and destructive.

Paul, therefore, issues this stern warning that if one's works becomes the basis of salvation—even for "staying in"—then Christ is of no benefit (5:2). Paul rejects any form of works righteousness—both strict and moderate—because it first and foremost deprives Christ of His sufficiency and glory. Secondly, he opposes all forms of theological legalism because it renders Christ of no profit to us (5:2).

This combination of faith and works as being necessary for salvation was essentially the same error the Protestant Reformers opposed in the Reformation. Thus, Luther, contending against the Roman system of salvation, states the following from Galatians 5:2,

For if they are able to abolish sins and to merit the forgiveness of sins and eternal life by their own righteousness and ascetic life, what good does it do them that Christ was born, suffered, shed His blood, was raised, conquered sin, death, and the devil, when they themselves can overcome these monsters by their own powers. It is indescribable what great wickedness it is to make Christ useless” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 27, p. 10).

Just as in Paul’s day as well as the Reformer’s day, this false gospel of “Jesus plus” continues to threaten the church in our day. This happens whenever the Bible’s clear distinctions between law and gospel and faithfulness and faith are confused concerning the way salvation is applied to us (i.e., by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone; see Michael Horton, “Paul and Covenantal Nomism,” <http://www.modernreformation.org/default.php?page=articledisplay&var1=ArtRead&var2=244&var3=authorbio&var4=AutRes&var5=1>).

REFLECTION:

As we consider theological legalism—both strict and moderate—there are three things we need to take note of.

1. STRICT AND MODERATE THEOLOGICAL LEGALISM ARE UTTERLY DESTRUCTIVE TO A PERSON’S LIFE.

Martin Luther writes,

...anyone who is a founder or a worshiper of the doctrine of works suppresses the Gospel, nullifies the death and victory of Christ, obscures His sacraments and abolishes their proper use, and is a denier, an enemy, and a blasphemer of God and of all His promises and blessings. Anyone who is not frightened away from human traditions and from trust in his own righteousness and works and who is not aroused to yearn for freedom in Christ by the fact that Paul calls the Law of God a “yoke of slavery” is harder than a rock or a bar of iron (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 27, p. 10).

2. WE MUST GUARD AGAINST THE DANGER OF FALLING INTO A PRIDEFUL THEOLOGICAL RIGHTEOUSNESS.

We need to be careful—ironically—of a new kind of works-righteousness that says “If you don’t really get grace, you’re lost.” There are genuine believers who are truly justified/saved but yet inconsistent in their theology. So, we need to include a porous boundary, allowing for inconsistency in our own as well as others’ on the theological side

at times. This is a check to guard us from a prideful, “theological righteousness”—I have good theology therefore God prefers me over those who have bad theology (cf. *Gospel-Centered Life*, Lesson 2, p. 26). This, however, is quite different from the false gospel threatening the Galatians, which was an outright denial of the gospel.

3. WE MUST NOT QUICKLY DISMISS THE THREAT OF THEOLOGICAL LEGALISM AND THINK WE ARE SAFE FROM IT.

Quickly dismissing Paul’s warning against the threat of theological legalism is a failure to understand how pervasive and ever-present this problem actually is within the church. It is easy to be tempted to think, “I know salvation is not by works but rather a free gift. That is so basic. I am not a Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Mormon, Jehovah’s Witness, etc...” But, the reality is that many people—because they diminish God’s law and misunderstand what He requires—believe they have actually met God’s standards for salvation.

Consider, for example, the following key findings of a 2008 Pew Forum poll concerning the beliefs of Evangelicals. Only 45% surveyed were “explicit in stating that belief in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation...while another 19% are somewhat more generic in their responses, citing belief in God or, more simply, “belief” or “faith” as most important. An additional 10% of evangelicals say that a combination of belief and actions are crucial for salvation...” (<http://pewforum.org/Many-Americans-Say-Other-Faiths-Can-Lead-to-Eternal-Life.aspx#2>)

The survey found that “six-in-ten Catholics (61%) explicitly cite actions or works as integral to attaining eternal life.” Lastly, “Among Christians who see actions as the key to obtaining eternal life, the vast majority (68%) name at least one non-Christian faith that can lead to eternal life, including 56% who name more than one non-Christian faith that can lead to salvation.”

One of the deadly mistakes pastors and churches often make is to assume that the people who are in their congregations week after week understand and believe the gospel. We must neither be quick to assume the gospel or its implications for our lives nor for the lives of future generations. Instead, we must consistently put ourselves in reminder of it.

In 2 Peter 1:13, Peter reminds his readers, “I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder.” Peter expected that his execution by Rome was imminent (1:14). Therefore, his words of exhortation are especially important. Before his death, Peter sought to emphasize what was of paramount importance to the believers in Asia Minor.

Christians can and do become sluggish and lose their spiritual alertness in regards to what they believe and how they are to live (cf. Mark 13:35-37). Regardless of how many times we have heard the gospel—or how spiritually mature we think we are—we need to be continually reminded of it and its implications for our daily living. Peter considered this “right.” As long as he was alive, Peter says part of his duty as a faithful shepherd was to

consistently teach and remind believers of the truth of the gospel and its implications for their lives.

In the 17th century, the great Scottish preacher Ralph Erskine, contending against legalism in his day—neonomianism—wrote,

“Our office is to bear the radiant torch,
Of gospel-light, into the darkened porch
Of human understandings, and display
The joyful dawn of everlasting day” (*The Practical Works of Ralph Erskine*, vol. 10, p. 94).

Without a continual reminder of the truths of the gospel and its implications for our lives, we can easily fall prey to what David Gibson calls “Assumed Evangelicalism.”

In his article, “Assumed Evangelicalism Some Reflections En Route to Denying the Gospel,” Gibson writes, “Assumed Evangelicalism believes and signs up to the gospel. It certainly does not deny the gospel. But in terms of priorities, focus, and direction, assumed Evangelicalism begins to give gradually increasing energy to concerns other than the gospel...” (<http://beginningwithmoses.org/other-articles/255/assumed-evangelicalism-some-reflections-en-route-to-denying-the-gospel>).

The road that leads to denying the gospel and falling prey to theological legalism is paved as follows:

1. The first generation believes and proclaims the gospel.
2. The next generation assumes the gospel but doesn't make it paramount.
3. The subsequent generations end up rejecting and denying the gospel.

So, the deadly pattern is: “Proclaim, Assume, Deny.” This is why, for example, we remind you each week that the life-giving pattern for the Christian life is: “Hear, believe, enjoy and proclaim the gospel—repeatedly.”

Michael Horton observes that too often, the gospel itself is left behind as if the gospel were not itself the source of numerical and spiritual growth (“Law & Gospel,” in *Modern Reformation Magazine*, p. 56). He continues,

The gospel is not merely a message that people need to hear to become converted; it is the ‘power of God unto salvation’ in every moment of the Christian life. The commands of Scripture continue to direct, but only the gospel gives. As we mature in the Christian life, the goal is not to move beyond the gospel but to grow deeper in it, understanding more and more what it means to be part of God’s new creation: justified, sanctified, and one day glorified (p. 56).

You must also understand that a continual reminder of the gospel is not just for your sake. Preserving the truth of the gospel is an act of selfless love for the sake of others. In Galatians 2:5, Paul's response to the false brothers in Jerusalem was of huge importance for the Galatians. If he had betrayed the very essence of the gospel in Jerusalem, the Galatians would not have heard the true gospel. Paul writes, "to them [false brothers] we did not yield in submission even for a moment, *so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you*" (emphasis mine). Paul acted to preserve the truth of the gospel for the sake of others who would be set free from the slavery of self-justification and come into the possession of the freedom of sonship.

The vitality, well-being and life of a church are dependent upon a continual reminder of the gospel. Graeme Goldsworthy says it like this, "The life and ministry of the local church needs to be self-consciously gospel-centered if it is to maintain any kind of effectiveness for the kingdom of God" (*Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, p. 129).

The threat of theological legalism is an ever-present danger. Therefore, it is foolish to quickly dismiss Paul's warning against it.

The Rich Young man in Matthew 19 exemplifies the error of theological legalism. In Matthew 19:16, this young man—blinded with confidence in works—approaches Jesus and asks, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" Since the young man only inquires how salvation is gained by the law, Jesus sends him directly to the law, which is a perfect mirror of righteousness (see Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.18.9).

Jesus then asks, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." In other words, "Why do you ask Me what is good? You know what the Law says. There is no one good. But, if you truly desire to enter life on the basis of the Law, keep the commandments."

There are people all around us who think just like this rich young man. Many think because they have "lived a good life," or given financial contributions to the church, given money to charities and contributed to humanitarian causes, donated time to community service, etc... they are good. But what is lacking is what the young man lacked. The young man lacked a sense of his real sinfulness. He did not have a proper understanding of what is truly "good."

Philanthropy, community service, etc... does not meet the Law's standard for "goodness." These things are what John Calvin called "civic virtue." Due to the Fall, the light of God's truth in man is "choked with dense ignorance, so that it cannot come forth effectively" (*Institutes*, 2.2.12). Because man's will is inseparable from his fallen nature, it is bound to wicked desires and therefore cannot strive after the right (Ibid). Amid the corruption of man's nature by virtue of the Fall, there still is some place for God's grace. However, this grace doesn't cleanse man's corrupt state but rather restrains it (*Institutes*, 2.3.3. cf. 2.8.6). Thus, Calvin rightly concludes, "For even though the life of man be replete with all the virtues, if it is not directed to the worship of God, it can indeed be

praised by the world; but in heaven it will be sheer abomination, since the chief part of righteousness is to render to God his right and honor, of which he is impiously defrauded when we do not intend to subject ourselves to His control” (3.3.7). Even though man’s civic virtues are beneficial for others they are not done out of a heart of love for God—directed to the worship of God as Calvin notes—but rather they are done out of “enlightened self-interest.”

Others may be guilty of an ecclesiastical righteousness (e.g., trusting in baptism rather than the reality given in baptism—Christ; making a “decision” for Jesus, joining a church, singing in the choir, teaching Sunday School, giving financial contributions, going on a mission trip, practicing spiritual disciplines, etc...).

Blinded by his own self-interest and confidence in his good works, the young man—just as many today—did not understand that all of his “good works” were like a polluted garment (Isa. 64:6). Though praised by the world, in heaven they are sheer abomination.

The young man thought he was good, so in reply to Jesus he asks, “¹⁸ ... “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, ¹⁹ Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁰ The young man said to him, “All these I have kept. What do I still lack?”

Jesus corrects his misunderstanding and directs him to the Law and its standard of goodness/righteousness. He applies the 10th commandment in v. 21, which forbids coveting. This is in reality a violation of the 1st commandment—“You shall have no other gods before Me.” Jesus knew that the love of money had become the idolatrous god of his life. Wealth was his source of personal identity, validity and sense of meaning in life. By directing this young man to the spiritual requirement of God’s law, Jesus sought to turn him from focusing on external conformity to the law in order to come face to face with his utter lack of goodness.

To be sure, Jesus wasn’t teaching that this young man could be saved by giving his possessions to the poor. Also, contrary to popular but misguided notions, Jesus wasn’t commending voluntary poverty. He wasn’t issuing a mandate for Christians to deprive themselves of all their possession. This is not an example “that Jesus does sometimes call people to sell everything they have and give it to the poor” (see David Platt, *Radical*, p. 120). Nor is this passage teaching that because Jesus is “Lord” it calls us to consider if we are at least “willing to ask God if he wants us to sell everything we have” (Ibid, p. 120). Neither is this kind of abandonment that Jesus asked of the rich young man at the core of Jesus’ invitation throughout the Gospels (Ibid, 11.). This passage is not an invitation of the gospel. Rather, Jesus is setting forth the requirements of the law in order to expose the young man’s (and our!) pretensions of law-keeping, thereby demonstrating his lack of genuine obedience, righteousness and goodness.

Jesus was not asking the young man if he is perhaps “willing” to sell it all. This was exactly his problem! He was exposing that he was not willing to sell it all! Jesus knew

this young man was puffed up with empty confidence in works. So in order to teach him that he is a sinner subject to the judgment of God, Jesus sets forth the exacting demand of God's law.

The demand of God's law is not, "Do this and be radical." The demand of God's law is far more "radical" than this! The demand of God's law is, "Do this and live, or else be damned" (Matt. 19:17; Luke. 10:28). If you seek salvation by works—either for "getting in" or "staying in" you must keep the commandments, which instructs us in perfect righteousness.

We see then that the young man not only asked the wrong question (v. 16) but he also gave the wrong response (v. 22, "When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions."). This whole encounter was about goodness—or the lack thereof. Do you have enough goodness, righteousness, obedience to satisfy the requirement of God's law? The Law says no! God's law indicts every one of us. This is the law's pronouncement, "...all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one" (Ps. 14:3; cf. Rom. 3:12).

Even when we have done our duty as believers—even out of delight, albeit only a small measure—Jesus tells us that we are nothing more than unprofitable servants (Lk. 17:10). We can never do enough to "get in" (strict theological legalism) or "stay in" (moderate theological legalism) for salvation.

The person who trusts in his righteousness for salvation—either to "get in" or "stay in"—is condemned. Christ is of no benefit to the legalist (Gal. 5:2). Since none of us are capable of keeping God's commandments we must look outside of ourselves to another for help. The Good News announces to us that there is a Man who is truly good, who kept all of God's commandments—Jesus Christ. We must look by faith to Christ alone.

To those who are truly humbled by the Law and crushed by the knowledge of their lack of goodness, Jesus will be of great benefit! To those who despair of their sin and are weighed down by the crushing "yoke of slavery" Jesus says, "²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30). To the one panting for life, Jesus promises, "Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of His heart [Jesus' heart!] will flow rivers of living water'" (Jn. 7:38) instead of judgment!

Thus, the Galatians are to remain firm in their freedom because to submit to circumcision—a moderate theological legalism, which maintains that works plus faith in Christ are necessary for salvation—results in destructive consequences (5:2-6).

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