

THREATS TO CHRISTIAN FREEDOM: LEGALISM  
PART 4

TEXT: GALATIANS: 5:2-12

October 2, 2011

**INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:**

In Galatians 5:2, Paul, with great zeal, warns, “Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.” Paul is passionately pleading to prevent Christ from being of no benefit to the sinner. Nothing can be worse than for Christ to be of no advantage to you. And it is legalism that renders Christ of no advantage.

Therefore, in Galatians 5:2-12, to keep us from falling prey to the threat of legalism (license being the second threat in vv. 13-24) Paul begins in vv. 2-6 by issuing a solemn warning against the destructive consequences of legalistic doctrine (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 disastrous 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 have already looked at the first consequence in v. 2 (i.e., Christ being of no benefit to the sinner).

In order to better understand Paul’s solemn warning against legalism, we need to pause and distinguish between two differing types of legalism. The two differing types are theological and functional legalism. Both types of legalism render Christ useless but in different ways. Last week, we examined theological legalism.

A. 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/good works will gain you eternal life/salvation. There are two different forms of theological legalism.

1. STRICT THEOLOGICAL LEGALISM

Historically, strict theological legalism is known as Pelagianism. According to strict theological legalism, grace is not necessary for salvation. Every person is essentially good and capable of doing what is necessary for salvation. Over against strict theological legalism is a moderate form of theological legalism, which is the threat Paul opposes in Galatians (i.e., covenantal nomism).

## 2. MODERATE THEOLOGICAL LEGALISM

Paul opposed the notion that one “gets in” by grace but “stays in” by works. In Galatians 3:3, Paul asks the Galatians, “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” The “Galatian heresy” Paul warns against didn’t deny Jesus or grace. It simply added additions to Christ as necessary for salvation (cf., Acts 15:1). But, Paul argues that a supplemented Christ is a supplanted Christ and benefits no one (Gal. 5:2).

So, whether it is strict or moderate legalism, Paul rejects all forms of theological legalism—works righteousness—because it deprives Christ of His sufficiency and glory and renders Him of no benefit to men in the final judgment (cf. Gal. 5:2; see also 1:8-9).

The consequence of theological legalism is deserved condemnation for outright denying the gospel. Christ is of no benefit to the strict and moderate legalist precisely because he or she has entered upon another means of justification. In contrast to theological legalism, there is also the threat of functional legalism, which we want to explore today.

### LESSON:

#### B. FUNCTIONAL LEGALISM

What is functional legalism? Functional legalism is when through unbelief the believer reverts back into a fleshly, slave mentality and relies on false sources of righteousness to gain a sense of acceptance and favor with God.

In Galatians 5:1, Paul declares that the believer is free from both the commanding and condemning power of the law in regards to justification. Believers are free from the obligation of obeying the law for life and free from the condemnation of the law for disobeying. But, because we do not know the gospel well enough, through unbelief we often give place to the usurped power of the law and begin living as if we have to perform to gain God’s favor.

We presume that by our duty (good works) we obtain a good standing/favor with God. Or, we despair of our salvation on account of our sins and think that we have forfeited His favor. Both errors reveal a performance mentality (i.e., functional legalism). We have forgotten that God doesn’t intend for us to relate to Him directly—either by duty or despair. Our performance of duties is never good enough and our despair is never pure enough. The only way we can relate to God is through Christ alone!

Presumption of duty and unbelieving despair both reveal a slave mentality rather than a son mentality. The gospel-truth is that we are free from the obligation to obey the Law in order to obtain a good standing/favor with God. And, we are free from having to fear that we lose our good standing/favor with God because of our ongoing disobedience to the Law. Both types of performance mentality are veiled evidences of self-confidence and pride—a slave mentality—born out of unbelief.

Paul, however, says in Galatians 4:7, “you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.” In contrast, a son mentality is turned outside of oneself. A son mentality wholly receives and rests in Christ alone for acceptance and favor before God. Ralph Erskine writes,

The main scope of the Gospel is, to exclude all self-confidence, and stain the pride of man, to bring in self-denial, and exalt the glory of Christ; to extol His righteousness, by which He has magnified the law, and made it honourable; to exhibit such a way of salvation to sinners, as shall most advance the honour of all the divine perfections which shine most brightly in the face and person of Jesus Christ; and to bring men to such a true and lively faith of the free grace and mercy of God in Christ, as will be the only solid root and spring of true peace, heart-holiness, and practical godliness...” (quoted in *Gospel Truth*, John Brown of Whitburn, pp. 77-78).

The gospel calls us to look, not at our own good deeds or failures but to Christ alone as He is freely promised to us in the gospel! Only the life-promising, freedom-giving, slave-destroying, powerful, good news of the gospel can deliver you from the enslaving, Christ-denying idols self-pity and self-performance (i.e., self-confidence and pride).

Functional legalism—like theological legalism—makes Christ to be of no benefit but in a different way. Last week, we saw how theological legalism results in a man losing the value of Christ’s saving work for *receiving* salvation. How then does functional legalism render Christ useless to the genuine believer? Functional legalism results in the believer losing the value of Christ’s saving work for *walking* in salvation (i.e., living the Christian life). Theological legalism results in eternal condemnation. In contrast, functional legalism results in distressed, sad consciences, slavish fear and duty, paralyzing guilt and joyless Christian living.

We must not lose sight of the context of chapter 5, which is the ethical section of this letter (4:12-6:10). James Boice observes that Paul is making the important point that,

...even the ethical life must begin by recognizing that the foundation of God’s dealings with men is grace through faith rather than legalism. ‘Do you wish to lead a holy life?’ Paul seems to be asking. ‘Then begin with the principles of faith and shun legalism.’ Holiness will never come as the result of someone insisting on adherence to either man-made or even God-made regulations” (*Galatians*, p. 487).

The Christian life proceeds just like it begins, by faith (Gal. 3:3). Understanding *Sola Fide* in relation to sanctification is crucial. We grow—progress in our Christian lives—through believing the gospel. It is important to note that when we describe the Christian life as a life lived by faith—sanctification *Sola Fide*—we are not suggesting a life of no effort/works. Neil Williams notes, “The life of faith is a life of effort, but it is a certain type of effort. We must therefore distinguish between two types of effort, believing and unbelieving” (*Theology of Sonship*, p.7). In Hebrews 11, the phrase, “by faith” is used 19

times. The “by faith” phrase allows for neither “Let go and let God” or a “dead, empty faith” (cf. Jam. 2:17). The kind of genuine saving faith the author speaks of in Hebrews 11 describes a living and active trust in Christ, a heart-reliance on God—as Paul says in Galatians 5:6, “...faith working through love.” see Williams, p. 7).

But, what we need to understand is this: it is by the gospel that we are born again (1 Peter 1:23-25). It is the gospel that brings about true faith (Acts 16:14; Romans 1:16; 10:17; 1 Cor. 1:21). The Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel (see *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. 21, 53, 65). And it is the gospel, which produces the sanctified or Spirit-filled life (Colossian 1:5-6).

The battle then against legalism—both theological and functional—is fought by faith. The Christian life, then, is a fight to believe something—the gospel—rather than to do something—functional legalism. Yet, throughout our Christian lives we are in a perpetual conflict with our own unbelief (see Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.17). As a result, much of a legal spirit remains in us after our initial conversion. Therefore, the threat of functional legalism continually assaults the Christian. Ralph Erskine, in his sermon, “Law-Death, Gospel-Life” writes,

It is not easy to get the law killed; something of a legal disposition remains even in the believer while he is in this world: many a stroke does self and self-righteousness get, but still it revives again. If he were wholly dead to the law, he would be wholly dead to sin; but so far as the law lives, so far sin lives.

*They that think they know the Gospel well enough bewray [reveal-J.F.] their ignorance; no man can be too evangelical, it will take all his life-time to get a legal temper [disposition-J.F.] destroyed.*

Though the believer be delivered wholly from the law, in its commanding and condemning power and authority, or its rightful power that it hath over all that are under it: yet he is not delivered wholly from its usurped power, which takes place many times upon him, while here, through remaining unbelief” (p. 27 emphasis mine).

When we fail to fight the threat of functional legalism by faith, the consequence of our unbelief Calvin writes is, “...so to tremble as to turn aside from God when one does not open the door for himself by faith” (*Institutes*, 3.2.17). Functional legalism results in us becoming troubled on all sides by the agitation of unbelief (*Institutes*, 3.2.18).

Religions that operate according to a theological legalism—works-based righteousness—are easy to spot (e.g., Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism). But, the subtler forms of functional legalism that we daily struggle with, as believers are more difficult to detect. As we consider then the threat of functional legalism, what are some ways that we render Christ useless in our daily lives (i.e., in the pursuit of sanctification)?

## REFLECTION:

The following are 5 ways believers often fall prey to functional legalism and make Christ useless in their daily lives. You make Christ useless when:

1. YOU COMPLAIN MORE FOR LACK OF HOLINESS THAN FOR A LACK OF CHRIST.

In distinguishing between the legalist and an evangelical (“gospel-believing”) Christian, Ralph Erskine writes:

They differ in their complaints. The legalist will complain more for want of holiness than for want of Christ; seeing he hath taken up with self-righteousness, it is his all, it is his happiness, it is his husband, it is his God. But the language of the evangelical Christian, who is dead to the law, is, O for Christ! O for a day of power! O to be wrapt up in the covenant of grace! to get an omnipotent power, determining me to comply with the gospel-offer” (quoted in *Gospel-Truth*, pp. 292-293).

Many conservative Evangelicals—particularly those who read Jonathan Edwards and Puritans, e.g., *The Almost Christian Discovered* by Matthew Mead—are at times guilty of trying to atone for their sins by continually fretting over their lack of affections for Christ. Do you think your continual despair can better atone for your sins than Christ’s death on the cross? Concerning the problem of Edwards’ view of justification, George Hunsinger writes,

Faith as a subjective act and disposition was then interpreted by Edwards as a secondary derivative reason why the believer was pleasing to God and rewarded by God. The idea of faith as a pleasing disposition that God would reward then opened the door to themes that the Reformation had excluded. Inherent as opposed to alien holiness, active as opposed to passive righteousness, and Christ’s righteousness as a benefit decoupled from his person all entered in Edwards’ doctrine in a way that, to some degree, undermined his basic Reformation intentions (“An American Tragedy: Jonathan Edwards on Justification,” quoted in *Justified*, Ryan Glomsrud and Michael Horton, p. 56).

Continual self-pity and morbid introspection is evidence of self-righteousness rather than genuine self-denial and faith in Christ. Such is the fruit of a defective understanding of justification. Holiness will never come as the result of fretting born out of unbelief.

Second, you make Christ useless in your daily life when:

2. YOU LIVE UNDER FALSE CONDEMNATION.

One of the paralyzing consequences of functional legalism is false condemnation. Because of a continual struggle with unbelief, it is easier to live under the sting of the law rather than to rest by faith in the comfort of the gospel. As Graeme Goldsworthy observes

we like to feel battered and bruised. We like to be told what a hopeless bunch we are. We love to have the law laid down heavy and be told what to do to improve our pitiful spiritual lives. We like to be given tasks to improve our performance. Why? Goldsworthy writes,

I suggest that we love this kind of treatment because we are legalists at heart. We would love to be able to say that we have fulfilled all kinds of conditions, be they tarrying, surrendering fully, or getting rid of every known sin, so that God might truly bless us. It is a constant temptation to want to take our spiritual pulse and to apply the sanctificational barometer. This is not necessarily the same as the worthwhile discipline of self-examination. Self-examination is a way of uncovering and coming to terms with the very problem under review. True self-examination is a means of going back to the source of our salvation because it reminds us of the constant need of grace (*Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, p. 118).

We have fallen prey to functional legalism when after seeing our sin we remain in an ongoing “woe-is-me” state of remorse—a perpetual pity party (living by “worm-based” theology). When we come under the stinging indictment of the law and our conscience roars against our failures, Martin Luther counsels, “Now it is time to turn your eyes away from the Law, from works, and from your own feelings and conscience, to lay hold of the Gospel, and to depend solely on the promise of God” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 26, p. 389).

When we turn to Christ, we experience the assuring witness of the Spirit in our hearts that cries out: “Abba, Father!” (Gal. 4:6). Therefore, however much the Law condemns, however loudly our consciences accuse, however deeply our sin inflicts despair, nevertheless, we have the promise of the forgiveness of sins, the imputation of Christ’s perfect righteousness and the privilege of adoption as sons by which we are welcomed with full acceptance by the Father and can no more be condemned for our sins and cast away than the Son of God Himself!

But, sadly, many Christians live under a continual sense of false condemnation and therefore are kept in slavery and bondage. The reasons for this are many. False condemnation is partly due to a steady diet of theological legalism. Part is a failure to properly understand how to respond to one’s ongoing battle with his or her own legal disposition. And, part is due to a dark and confused understanding of the difference between the law and the gospel.

But the more people have their minds enlightened by the unsearchable riches of gospel-truth the more they will begin to sense a life of glorious liberty and freedom from the condemnation of the law. The more evangelically minded we become (i.e., gospel-centered) the more we will experience comfort instead of condemnation. Our continual occurrence of mental confusion, discouragement, and despondency will lessen and joy and freedom will increase. Jesus promised this in John 8:32, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Yes, we should feel guilty and remorseful when we sin. But, we must not remain there! To remain in our guilt and wallow in self-despair is unbelief. We must turn our minds and affections in faith toward Christ. We must trust in specific gospel promises that break the power of our functional idols—our false sources of righteousness that give us a sense of favor and good standing with God (see the *Gospel-Centered Life*, Lesson 6 by World Harvest Mission).

Even though we experience the condemnation of the law, because of the gospel we can remain eternally hopeful about our present and future standing with God. Walter Marshall put it like this,

You are more sinful than you can imagine! The doctrine of Original Sin is true! You cannot reform your flesh! You cannot become a better person by your own strength no matter how hard you try! But cheer up! If you are a Christian, you have come into union with Christ. Through faith in Jesus Christ you are forgiven. Through faith in Jesus Christ you are sanctified and made holy. Through Christ, you are a new creation! The Holy Spirit lives in you! Therefore, pursue the life of faith in Christ with all diligence!" (*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, p. 13).

You render Christ useless in your daily life when:

3. YOU LIVE IN CONTINUAL DOUBT AND ANXIETY IN REGARD TO GOD'S FATHERLY FAVOR.

It is an insult to Christ and you condemn the freeness of His grace, the sufficiency and perfection of His saving work and the fullness of His glory by living in continual doubt and anxiety of the Father's favor.

Unbelief produces doubt and anxiety in regards to the Father's favor. Unbelief places confidence in the flesh. But faith glories in Christ (Philip. 3:3). Faith in Christ creates boldness and confidence in the believer's heart toward the Father, "in whom [Christ] we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in Him" (Eph. 3:12). John Calvin writes, "...When first even the least drop of faith is instilled in our minds, we begin to contemplate God's face, peaceful and calm and gracious toward us" (*Institutes*, 3.2.19).

Martin Luther declares,

We ought to feel sure that we stand in the grace of God, not in view of our own worthiness, but through the good services of Christ. As certain as we are that Christ pleases God, so sure ought we to be that we also please God, because Christ is in us. And although we daily offend God by our sins, yet as often as we sin, God's mercy bends over us. Therefore sin cannot get us to doubt the grace of God. Our certainty is of Christ, that mighty Hero who overcame the Law, sin, death, and all evils. So long as He sits at the right hand of God to intercede for us, we have nothing to fear from the anger of God.

Fourth, you make Christ useless in your daily life when:

4. YOU RECEIVE MORE COMFORT IN YOUR WORKS RATHER THAN THE PERFECT IMPUTED RIGHTEOUSNESS OF CHRIST.

Ask yourself, “In my daily Christian living, what comforts me and gives me peace? Is it “success” in my duties or rather faith in Christ’s imputed righteousness? Listen carefully again to Ralph Erskine,

The legalist finds comfort in law-works...In the prospect of trouble, who comforts him? Even this, that he hath done many good duties. He wraps himself in a garment of his own weaving. Upon challenges of conscience, what comforts him, and gives him peace? He even covers himself with the same robe. In the prospect of judgment, what comforts him, and gives him peace? Why, he hopes God will be merciful to him, because he hath had a good profession, and said many good prayers, and done many good duties...The only thing that gives a believer peace and ease in these cases, is the law-abiding righteousness of Christ, under which he desires to shrowd himself. He flees to the blood of Jesus Christ, saying, O I am undone, unless my soul be wrapt up in the mantle of Christ’s perfect righteousness; upon this righteousness of Jesus, I venture my soul” (quoted in *Gospel Truth*, pp. 292-293).

Christ is rendered useless in our daily lives when we presume that our good standing is based on our good works or upon our continual disposition of despair on account of our sins. Fifth, you make Christ useless in your daily life when:

5. YOU FAIL TO DEAL PROPERLY WITH PERSONAL TEMPTATION.

In our personal temptations, we must take note of three things.

- A. REMEMBER THE DEVIL IS YOUR ACCUSER, THE FATHER OF LIES (JN. 8:44) AND THE ENEMY OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM.

Because the devil is our false accuser, the Father of lies and the enemy of our freedom, Martin Luther notes that he “...at every moment...troubles us with false terrors, so that when this freedom has been lost, the conscience is in continual fear and feels guilt and anxiety” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 27, p. 11). When the enemy of our faith comes to us with false accusations not only of failing to do anything good but also of breaking God’s Law, we must say:

You are troubling me with the memory of past sins; in addition, you are telling me that I have not done anything good. This does not concern me. For if I either trusted in my performance of good works or lost my trust because I failed to perform them, in either case Christ would be of no avail to me. Therefore, whether you base your objections to me on my sins or on my good works, I do not care; for I put both of them out of sight and depend only on the freedom for which

Christ has set me free. Therefore, I shall not render Him useless to me, which is what would happen if I either presumed that I shall attain grace and eternal life because of my good works or despaired of my salvation on account of my sins” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 27, p. 11).

Second, in dealing properly with our personal temptations, we must:

- B. LEARN TO DISTINGUISH CHRIST AS COMPLETELY AS POSSIBLE FROM ALL WORKS—GOOD OR BAD.

In our battle with sin, we must recall that our good standing with God doesn’t depend on our good works or our despair for our failure. We cannot despair our way into God’s favor. Therefore, we must, Luther writes,

...learn to distinguish Christ as completely as possible from all works, whether good or evil; from all laws, whether divine or human; and from all distressed consciences. For Christ does not pertain to any of these. He does indeed pertain to sad consciences, not to trouble them even more but to raise them up again and to comfort them when they have been troubled” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 27, p. 11).

Lastly,

- C. DO NOT MISTAKE THE ACCUSER AND CONDEMNER FOR THE COMFORTER AND SAVIOR.

Martin Luther counsels,

“...if Christ appears in the guise of a wrathful judge or lawgiver who demands an accounting of how we have spent our lives, we should know for certain this is not really Christ but the devil. For Scripture portrays Christ as our Propitiator, Mediator, and Comforter. This is what He always is and remains; He cannot be untrue to His very nature. Therefore, when the devil assumes the guise of Christ and argues with us this way: ‘At the urging of My Word you were obliged to do this, and you failed to do so; and you were obliged to avoid that, and you failed to do so. Therefore you should know that I shall exact punishment from you,’ this should not bother us at all; but we should immediately think: ‘Christ does not speak this way to despairing consciences. He does not add affliction to those who are afflicted. ‘A bruised reed He will not break, and a dimly burning wick He will not quench’ (Isa. 42:3). To those who are rough He speaks roughly, but those who are in terror He invites most sweetly: ‘Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden’ (Matt. 11:28); ‘I came not to call the righteous, but sinners’ (Matt. 9:13); ‘Take heart, My son; your sins are forgiven’ (Matt. 9:2); ‘Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33); ‘The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost’ (Luke 19:10).’ Therefore we should be on our guard, lest the amazing skill and infinite wiles of Satan deceive us into mistaking the accuser and condemner for the Comforter and Savior, and thus losing the true Christ behind the mask of

the false Christ, that is, of the devil, and making Him of no advantage to us” (Ibid, pp. 11-12).

We must take seriously Paul’s solemn warning. At all times, we must diligently pursue a life of faith and oppose the threats of theological and functional legalism that continually assault our faith. By grace, we may cling to Christ alone through faith and rely upon Him as our only source of righteousness.

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