

THREATS TO CHRISTIAN FREEDOM: LEGALISM
PART 6

TEXT: GALATIANS 5:2-12

October 16, 2011

INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:

“Why does the devil, in all generations, oppose himself so much to the gospel, and to the doctrine of grace, and raise up all the calumnies [false, malicious, slanderous statements-J.F.] in the world against it? Even because it is the doctrine of grace that destroys his kingdom; for the devil knows, that while men are under the law, they are under his power, and under the power of sin; therefore he hath no ill-will at legal doctrine: but if one preach up grace, and nothing but free grace, then he will raise a hue [outcry-J.F.] after him, as an enemy to the law and holiness. Why, what ails the devil at the soul? Even because nothing spoils his market among souls so much, as the gospel, when it comes with power; for, it is the gospel, and not the law, that is the immediate instrument of conversion, Gal. 3:2 and of true holiness, Titus 2:11-12. And what is it that makes the gospel the power of God to salvation, and the powerful instrument of converting sinners to God? Even because therein is revealed the righteousness of God, from faith to faith, Rom. 1:15-17 and therein the righteousness of God, without the law, is manifested, Rom. 3:21.” (Ralph Erskine, “The Strength of Sin and how the LAW is the Strength thereof, opened and unfolded,” 1 Cor. 15:6, pp. 116-117).

To be sure, in every age, the truth of the gospel faces continual threats. It was true in Erskine’s day. It is true in our day and it was true in Paul’s day. In Galatians 5:2-24, Paul opposes two dangers that threatened the gospel and the believer’s freedom: legalism, vv. 2-12 and license, vv. 13-24. Paul deals with the most pressing threat first (i.e., legalism in vv. 2-12).

The Judaizers were first-century enemies of the faith and opponents of the gospel in particular and Christian freedom. They vigorously opposed Paul and his gospel of grace and freedom. They maliciously accused Paul of promoting sin (Gal. 2:17). They preached a “different” gospel (1:6). They were “disturbing” Paul’s converts and “distorting” his gospel message (1:7). They were “false brethren” seeking bondage rather than freedom (2:4; 5:1)

Thus, to keep the Galatians (as well as us) from falling prey to the threat of legalism, Paul begins in vv. 2-6 by setting forth three disastrous consequences that would result if the Galatians submitted to the legalistic doctrine of the Judaizers. So far we have seen:

- A. Christ will be of no benefit in the final judgment. v. 2
- B. Become a debtor to God’s law. v. 3

The third disastrous consequence of legalism is:

LESSON:

C. Severed from Christ. v. 4

Paul writes, “You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.”

The verb “justify” (δικαιοῦσθε) is used in the conative sense, which describes attempted action (see Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 231 and Schreiner, *Galatians*, p. 315). All who attempt to be justified by the law are severed from Christ. The verb, “severed” (κατηργήθητε) means to be estranged from Christ (BDAG, p. 526). Paul uses this verb in Romans 7:2 in reference to a woman whose husband’s death *released* (κατήρηται) her from the law which had bound her to him. Attempting to receive justification by the law is to be entirely separated from Christ. Thus, the legalist has fallen away from grace. J.B. Lightfoot comments, “Ye are nothing as regards Christ, ye are entirely separated from Him” (*Galatians*, p. 204).

It is important to note that the phrase, “you have fallen away from grace” does not mean a person can lose his or her salvation. Paul is not saying that a person who is justified can become unjustified (Note: Since this phrase is often misused as a proof-text for losing one’s salvation, we will come back to it at the end).

Concluding that one can lose his or her salvation is totally foreign to the context of Paul’s point in v. 4. The context of this passage is not discussing an individual’s personal relationship to God (i.e., “falling away from grace”). Rather, the context is discussing an individual’s relationship to the principle for receiving salvation” (see Homer Kent, Jr., *Galatians*, p. 145). John Murray writes,

...Paul is here dealing not with the question as to whether or not a believer may fall out of the favor of God and finally perish but with defection from the pure doctrine of justification by grace as opposed to justification by works of law. What Paul is saying in effect is that if we seek to be justified by the works of the law in any way or degree whatsoever then we have abandoned or fallen away entirely from justification by grace (Redemption Accomplished and Applied, p. 156).

The phrase, “you have fallen away from grace,” means to attempt to be justified through the Law (i.e., to choose legalism as the means of receiving salvation). Paul is emphasizing “the incompatibility of faith and works, of divine grace and human merit, where the justification of the sinner before God is in question” (F.F. Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 231). Homer Kent, Jr. writes, “Anyone who adopts a scheme of works for salvation has abandoned the way of grace which God provided...Because these ways are opposites, the adoption of one is the repudiation of the other. If deeds of law are trusted for justification, then of necessity Christ is not. By turning to the principle of circumcision for salvation, one turns away from the principle of grace” (*Galatians*, pp. 144-145).

Throughout this letter, Paul has repeatedly drawn a clear, sharp distinction between grace and works of the law. Grace and law cannot be mixed. Martin Luther writes, "...it is impossible for Christ and the Law to dwell in the heart at the same time. Either the Law or Christ has to yield" (*Luther's Works*, vol. 27, p. 17). John Stott observes, "It is impossible to receive Christ, thereby acknowledging that you cannot save yourself, and then receive circumcision, thereby claiming that you can" (*Galatians*, p. 133).

The law and gospel set forth two totally antithetical means of salvation. The Law justifies on the basis of "doing" (Gal. 3:10). To seek justification through works of the law is to seek it on the ground of one's own merit. But, the gospel announces that Christ justifies freely as a gift by grace through faith. In Romans 3:24 Paul says that we "are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus..."

The ground of justification by law is inherent righteousness. The ground of justification by grace through faith is the imputed righteousness of Christ alone. The conflict over justification comes down to this: Is the ground of our justification the righteousness of Christ *imputed* to us, or the righteousness of Christ working *within* in us? For Paul—and the Reformers in the 16th century—*Sola Fide* declares that the sole ground of our justification is the imputed righteousness of Christ.

Fung writes, "In Paul's mind, justification is either all of grace, by faith, through Christ, or it is nothing at all" (*Galatians*, p. 224). Calvin declares that even the "smallest part of justification cannot be attributed to the law without renouncing Christ and his grace" (*Calvin's Commentaries*, p. 151). Therefore, anyone who attempts to be justified by the Law—though no one is actually justified by law-keeping, which is impossible, Gal. 2:16; 3:11, 21—is severed from Christ—fallen away from grace.

A legalist is separated entirely from Christ because he is trying to achieve his own salvation rather than trusting in Christ alone. John Murray writes, "If we interject works to any degree then we have given up grace and we are debtors to do the whole law (cf. Gal. 5:3). Contrary then to the Judaizers, Paul argues that if anyone seeks to add circumcision to Christ for salvation (attempting to be justified by the law), he will be severed from Christ (i.e., fall away from grace).

What is grace? Grace in relation to justification is the favor of God for Christ's sake ("*favor Dei propter Christum*"). "For Christ's sake" expresses the fact that God "completely poured forth Himself and withheld nothing from us that He has not given us," (see "The Doctrine of Justification in the Lutheran Confessions," by Herbert J.A. Bouman, *Concordia Theological Monthly*, vol. 26, n11, 1955, p. 809).

Justification then is a pure gift of God, who shows mercy and favor to undeserving sinners for Christ's sake. To attempt then to be justified by law is to fall away from the favor of God and come under His judgment/condemnation. It is the exact opposite of what Paul says for example in Romans 5:2, "...Through Him (Christ) we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand..." Apart from Christ there is no access to grace—the divine favor of God. To be severed from Christ is to fall away

from the only realm where grace is found; it is to cut oneself off from the realm of grace (see *Luther's Works*, vol. 27, p. 18).

Apart from Christ there is only debt and therefore judgment and condemnation. Jesus, in John 3:18 states, "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." But, in John 5:24, Jesus announces good news, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life."

Grace and eternal salvation are bound up with the truth concerning Christ—His person and work. To receive Christ is to receive grace and to receive grace is to receive Christ. Grace is interchangeable with Christ. Therefore, to be severed from Christ—the realm of grace—is to forfeit the spiritual blessings Christ earned for us by His death and resurrection. All who attempt to be justified by the law forfeit peace, 1:3; deliverance, 1:4; justification, 2:16; the gift of the Holy Spirit, 3:2, 5, 14; 4:6; redemption, 3:13; adoption, 3:26-4:7; freedom, 5:1 and hope of final vindication 5:5, etc... In place of these gospel blessings, the legalist—debtor to God's law—acquires the wrath and judgment of God, sin, death, slavery to the devil, and eternal anathema, cf. 1:8-9 (see *Luther's Works*, vol. 27, p. 19).

REFLECTION:

Paul's warning is clear: If you attempt to add anything to Christ—circumcision—you are entirely separated from Him. You are no longer in the realm of grace but rather under condemnation. Salvation is *in* Christ alone *by* grace alone *through* faith alone. Therefore, the response/application demanded is quite clear: Don't separate yourself from Christ by choosing to receive salvation by the law! Rather, receive and rest in Christ alone as He is freely given to you through the gospel.

Before concluding, there is another important consideration from v. 4 that needs to be addressed. As previously noted, passages such as these are misused as proof-texts for teaching that believers can lose their salvation. Clearly, such a conclusion as we have seen is foreign to this context. But, we must not in reaction ignore or water down this warning. We need to let "Law" passages really be "Law." We must take this warning with the utmost seriousness. How then are we to understand warnings like this? Why are they given? How do they function?

First, we need to understand that:

1. THE VISIBLE (PROFESSING) CHURCH IS COMPRISED OF BOTH BELIEVERS AND UNBELIEVERS.

The Scriptures teach that not every person who professes faith in Christ is actually united to Christ. This is illustrated in Christ's parable of the Sower and Seed in Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23. The "seed" represents the gospel of the kingdom. And the "soil" represents

different types of hearts toward the gospel. The emphasis of the parable is on these different types of soil.

So, for example, Jesus speaks about the shallow heart in v. 20-21 and the worldly heart in v. 22. The gospel sown on rocky ground represents a shallow heart. A shallow heart is immediately receptive to the gospel and overjoyed by the good news. This person endures for a while but as soon as tough times come, he or she falls away (withers like a plant that has no root, vv. 20-21). The gospel sown on thorny ground represents a worldly heart (v. 22). This person hears the gospel but the gospel is choked out because their heart is filled with the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches.

For example, in contrast to Paul who perseveres in spite of suffering (cf. 2 Tim. 1:11–12; 2:8–13), Demas abandoned Paul. In 2 Timothy 4:10, Paul writes, “For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me...” The author of Hebrews in 12:15-17 says Esau committed an unthinkable act. As a means for immediate gratification for his physical hunger, Esau—the oldest son—sold his birthright right to Jacob (Gen. 25:33-34). Profession doesn’t equal possession. As the preceding texts show, there are professing believers who—for a while—have outwardly shown signs of faith and repentance but have never been truly united to Christ through faith alone (Heb. 6:5-6).

The visible church is comprised of dead and living branches (i.e., those who are related merely outwardly and visibly and those who are united to Christ inwardly and invisibly; cf. Rom. 11:16-24). Apostasy then is not merely hypothetical but it actually happens. Therefore, warning passages are necessary during this age because the visible church is comprised of both believers and unbelievers. Solemn warnings such as here in Galatians 5:4 are intended to target those who are visible members of the church who have never been truly united to Christ.

2. PAUL’S WARNING MUST BE UNDERSTOOD IN A COVENANTAL CONTEXT.

Like the author of Hebrews, Paul issues a challenge to the Galatians (and us!) to not merely belong to the covenant externally (i.e., trust in one’s reliance upon circumcision, observance of feast days, dietary laws, etc...). Rather, Paul issues a call to embrace through faith alone the reality that the covenant promises and conveys by the Spirit through the gospel, namely Christ (Gal. 3:16).

Embracing the shadows of the covenant rather than the reality is to be “severed from Christ...and fallen from grace” (5:4). Paul warns that all who trust in their physical descent from Abraham (3:7-14; 4:21-31), boast in circumcision (6:13-14; i.e., trust in the external sign and seal of the covenant rather than in Christ who is the reality of the covenantal signs), rely on the observance of ceremonies (4:10) and follow dietary laws (2:12) as a requirement for receiving salvation will experience the full crushing sentence of these warnings.

If then a “professing” believer desires (4:9, 21) to return to the shadows of the law, he is rejecting the reality to which the law points. Those who “fall away from grace” show by

their actions they were never truly born again. John, in 1 John 2:19 writes, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.”

John—just like Jesus in the parable of the Sower and Seed—teaches that all who fail to persevere demonstrate that they merely belonged to the covenant externally and were never truly united to Christ (they never were a genuine member of God’s covenant people, i.e., the sons of Abraham, Gal. 3:7). Tom Schreiner writes, “Apostasy in Galatians constitutes reliance on one’s own works, while those who persevere realize afresh every day that they are naked, miserable, and weak, and therefore they must rely on Christ and His righteousness alone for life” (*Galatians*, p. 319).

Everyone genuine believer who is united to Christ will persevere to the end (Jn. 6:37-39; 10:27-30; Rom. 8:28-30). But, all empty professors will fail to endure and eventually fall away from participation in the fellowship of the church (cf. Matt. 10:22; 24:13; Mk. 13:13). All who continue in the faith demonstrate they are genuine believers (Col. 1:23). All who fail to continue evidence that there was never genuine faith in their hearts in the first place (Jn. 8:31-32).

3. WARNING PASSAGES ARE THE MEANS GOD USES TO PRESERVE THE FAITH OF BELIEVERS.

Far from discouraging or causing doubt and fear in the true believer, warning passages are the means God uses to preserve the faith of true believers (see Schreiner, *Galatians*, p. 318). For example, when a genuine believer—good soil—hears warnings like this, he doesn’t respond by looking inward in order to secure his salvation by his own works. Rather, he renounces afresh any confidence or reliance upon works and keeps looking outward in faith to Christ alone for His standing before God.

Michael Horton writes,

Whatever in Scripture...causes the believer to fear God’s wrath should be accepted as God’s perpetual verdict on the salvific efficacy of the believer’s decisions, habits and works. But then the believer must turn to the gospel for the solution to this anxiety and not to a greater resolve at satisfying God’s commands...” (*Four Views on Eternal Security*, p. 42).

This warning passage serves as a “wake-up call” to believers in the Galatian churches who were being tempted to submit to the Mosaic Law entirely as a way of salvation (cf. Timothy George, *Galatians*, p. 359). Consequently, Paul’s solemn warning is intended to remind true believers to persevere (i.e., to continue looking outside of themselves and keep trusting in Christ alone to the very end; to eagerly look to the future for God’s final act of vindication on the last day, cf. Gal. 5:5).

Since, however, the visible church consists of true and false believers, Paul warns that all who attempt to be justified through the Law will be severed from Christ and suffer all the penalties of the Law. But those who persevere in faith and repentance despite their weakness, half-heartedness, and ongoing failures in both will be vindicated on the last day (Gal. 5:5; see *Four Views*, p. 42).

To be sure, genuine believers sin and can sometimes be guilty of committing grievous sins (e.g., Peter's denial of Christ, Matt. 26:69-75). Perseverance doesn't equal perfection—a straight line from conversion to glorification! Concerning perseverance the *Westminster Confession of Faith* writes that believers,

...may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and, for a time, continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve His Holy Spirit, come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts, have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves. (ch. 17.3).

Even though believers can commit grievous sins and backslide for a considerable period of time, no true saint will ever totally abandon themselves to sin. Michael Horton notes,

Although Peter denied Christ three times, Christ did not put out the smoldering wick or break off the bruised reed, but brought him back to faith by His Spirit after the resurrection. Yet those who deny Christ to the very end, even though they may perhaps have been outward members of the visible church, are lost because they were never living members through faith. "They went out from us," says John concerning those who deny Christ, "but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge" (1 Jn. 2:19-20) (*The Christian Faith*, p. 683).

So then a genuine believer can never "fall away from grace." No justified believer will ever revert to being unjustified—fall from a state of favor to condemnation. The reason is not because of "once saved always saved" (which can open a door for license). The reason is not because you have prayed a prayer, made a decision, joined a church, been baptized, confirmed, etc... If we were left to ourselves, we would fail to persevere and fall away. But, Jude says that God "is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy" (v. 24). The reason believers persevere and do not fall away is because God will not violate His covenantal oath. Michael Horton writes,

No longer slaves but sons, believers never have to fear condemnation, not because they have decided to follow Jesus but because Jesus has decided to follow them, keep them, and lead them safely to the land He has prepared for them. Not one of

His sheep will be lost—simply because of that eternal covenant that God swore to Himself, in the intra-Trinitarian fellowship” (*Four Views on Eternal Security*, p. 42).

“God *does* what He *declares*” (Horton, *The Christian Faith*, p. 681). Those whom God calls and justifies He also glorifies (Rom. 8:28-30). God cannot—will not—cast away all those He has redeemed, adopted and united to Christ without violating His covenant oath. In Romans 11:29, Paul writes, “For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” Again, Paul states, “I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philip. 1:6). God is the God of promise and performance. He will bring His good work to completion. Unlike the Mosaic Covenant, God has promised in the Abrahamic Covenant to personally perform all of the conditions and suffer all the curses for its violation. Thomas Boston writes, “By the redemption of Christ applied to the believer and by the oath of God, every believer is perfectly secure from the return of the curse upon him (Gal. 3:13.” *Marrow of Modern Divinity*, Part 1, p. 186).

The believer’s union with Christ is never dissolved. We are secure because it is God who justifies us rather than ourselves. We will forever know Him because He has chosen to forever know us (Gal. 4:9). To be known* by God is to be the eternal recipients of grace and mercy. To be known by God is to be adopted as His beloved sons. In fact, our whole salvation depends upon being known by God (*See *From Sonship To Slavery*, Parts 1-3 for a detailed explanation of what it means to be known by God and to know Him).

God the Father has taken the initiative by grace. Like Paul He has set us apart before we were born (Gal. 1:15). He has called us by grace (Gal. 1:15) and not because of anything we have accomplished. He called us—like Paul—at our absolute worst (Gal. 1:13-14). By grace, He has been pleased to reveal His Son to us (Gal. 1:16). When His appointed time had come, God the Father sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons (4:4-5). “God will see to it that the believer, who is always in this life simultaneously justified and sinful, will persevere, enduring the struggle with sin and suffering, until he or she beholds the Lamb who was slain sitting upon His throne” (*Four Views on Eternal Security*, p. 42).

Soli Deo Gloria!

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