

THREATS TO CHRISTIAN FREEDOM: LEGALISM
PART 5

TEXT: GALATIANS 5:2-12

October 9, 2011

INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:

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 solemn warnings 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

Specifically, 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). The first disastrous consequence we saw is in v. 2:

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

We have seen how theological legalism renders Christ useless for salvation. In the end, the legalist must appear before God's judgment clothed in his filthy, useless fig leaves (i.e., self-justification/unrighteousness). We have also seen how functional legalism renders Christ useless for living the Christian life. The second disastrous consequence that would result if the Galatians submitted to the legalistic doctrine of the Judaizers is that they would become a debtor to God's law.

LESSON:

B. BECOME A DEBTOR TO GOD'S LAW. V. 3

Paul writes, "I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is *obligated* to keep the whole law" (emphasis mine).

The verb, "I testify" sets Paul's argument in the context of a courtroom. First, notice that so serious is this warning, Paul solemnly testifies like a courtroom witness who is under oath. Paul is linking (πάλιν) the consequence of 5:3 to the truth he already set forth in 3:10. In Galatians 3:10, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 27:26, which teaches that the law only rewards—justifies—those who keep the whole law and condemns/curses those who fail to observe it perfectly. Thus, by trying to satisfy the Law and be set free by one's own works, Paul warns that a person will actually come under greater bondage and an unbearable obligation.

The word “obligated” means “debtor” (see “ὀφειλέτης,” BDAG, 742.). In this context it means one who is under obligation in a moral sense to do something. If the Galatians receive circumcision—submit to a “Do this and live” principle of salvation—they place themselves under the moral obligation to fulfill the terms of the covenant themselves—they become debtors.

There is an allusion here to the scene in Exodus 24 where the people of Israel are standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai swearing, “All this we will do” (see Ex. 24:3-8, particularly vv. 3, 7, 8). The point worthy of note here is that the oath Israel makes at Mt. Sinai is not gracious. Rather, this oath obligates the people to personally obey the whole Law as the basis for life in the land.

Note also that the oath Israel swears is ratified by the sprinkling of blood on them (v. 8). The sprinkling of blood highlights not only their need of cleansing from sin in order to enter into a covenant relation with God but it also highlights the ultimate penalty for breaking the covenant—death.

Going back then to Paul’s point Galatians 5:3, circumcision isn’t really the issue. As we have seen, Jesus was circumcised (Lk. 2:21) and Paul had Timothy circumcised so his uncircumcision would not be an issue in Jewish ministry contexts (Acts 16:3). Paul is saying that even in the very act of circumcision a man does not receive circumcision. IN fact, he does not fulfill the Law but actually breaks it! The reason is because circumcision only profits a man if he keeps the entire law. In Romans 2:25, Paul writes, “circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.”

Later in Galatians 6:13, Paul points out that those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves! As Luther writes, “The more men try to satisfy the Law, the more they transgress it. The more someone tries to bring peace to his conscience through his own righteousness, the more disquieted he makes it” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 27, p. 13).

Paul knew this from personal experience. By grace, he came to understand the utter impossibility and futility of living as a debtor to the law (i.e., trying to earn one’s righteousness by perfect obedience to the law, Cf. Philip. 3:6-9). Martin Luther also came to a realization of the utter impossibility and futility of trying to satisfy his obligation to the demands of the Law. Listen to his testimony,

When I was a monk, I made a great effort to live according to the requirements of the monastic rule. I made a practice of confessing and reciting all my sins, but always with prior contrition; I went to confession frequently, and I performed the assigned penances faithfully. Nevertheless, my conscience could never achieve certainty but was always in doubt and said: ‘You have not done this correctly. You were not contrite enough. You omitted this in your confession.’ Therefore, the longer I tried to heal my uncertain, weak, and troubled conscience with human traditions, the more uncertain, weak and troubled I continually made it. In this way, by observing human traditions, I transgressed them even more; and by

following the righteousness of the monastic order, I was never able to reach it. For, as Paul says, it is impossible for the conscience to find peace through works of the Law, much less through human traditions, without the promise and the Gospel about Christ” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 27, p. 13).

These are the words of a debtor and this is the kind of indebtedness Paul is warning against in v. 3. The reason then Paul draws the line in the sand here is because what it means to the Galatians. Because of the theological legalism they were being taught, the Galatians think they are like Israel standing at the foot of Mount Sinai, swearing, “All this we will do,” with respect to salvation. But—as we have learned, Cf. Gal 3:19-22—the Mosaic Covenant was never given for salvation. If the Galatians submit to circumcision as a legal requirement necessary for salvation, they thereby accept the principle of salvation by law-keeping and this entails the moral obligation of keeping the whole Law (Cf. Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 230).

If then the Galatians cross Paul’s line and obligate themselves to personally keep the Mosaic Covenant (i.e., be justified by the law), they will come under a curse (3:10). They will move from the covenant of grace into the covenant of works. The Galatians would be obligating themselves to keep the whole law in order to receive its pronouncement of justification (2:16) and final vindication (5:5) and avoid its verdict of condemnation—curse/final judgment (1:8-9; 3:10).

Such a way of life brings a man or woman under an intolerable burden. Luther says trying to fulfill one’s obligation to the Law is like washing away dirt with dirt (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 27, p. 13). The Wall Street Journal published an article entitled, “On the Rise of Debtor’s Prison: ‘The Scariest Thing That Ever Happened to Me’” (See: [http://blogs.wsj.com/law/2011/03/17/on-the-rise-of-debtors-prison-the-scariest-thing-that-ever-happened-to-me/March 17, 2011](http://blogs.wsj.com/law/2011/03/17/on-the-rise-of-debtors-prison-the-scariest-thing-that-ever-happened-to-me/March%2017,%202011)).

The article details how 21st Century America is returning to the debtor’s prison. According to the article, “more than a third of all U.S. states allow borrowers who can’t or won’t pay to be jailed. Judges have signed off on more than 5,000 such warrants since the start of 2010 in nine counties.” The article goes on to feature a debtor who—to his surprise—was met by a Sheriff’s deputy at his home holding a warrant to arrest him for not paying the money he owed on a loan for his pickup truck.

The article provides the following account,

After being handcuffed in front of his four children, Stearns, 29 years old, spent two nights in jail, where he said he was strip-searched and sprayed for lice. Court records show he was released after agreeing to pay \$1,500 to the loan company. “I didn’t even know I was being sued,” he said, though he doesn’t dispute owing the money. “It’s the scariest thing that ever happened to me.”

Don’t miss his last statement, “It’s the scariest thing that ever happened to me.” If you think financial indebtedness is scary, it is only a faint glimpse of our moral indebtedness

to God for having broken His Law! As covenant law breakers—having broken all God’s commandments—we are all debtors to God and His justice. We are all under the crushing obligation to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and to love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:37-39). We owe to God a vast amount, which we are not able to pay. Thus, the scariest thing that could ever happen to you is to become a debtor to God’s law and thus Christ become of no benefit to you!

This is precisely why legalism is such a great threat. It turns a man into a debtor by obligating him to live under the intolerable burden of earning God’s favor—justification—by fulfilling the law himself (cf. Matt. 5:17-18; Gal. 3:10). To the legalist, Jesus thus utters these chilling words, “If you would enter life, keep the commandments...(Matt. 19:17)...“do this, and you will live” (Lk. 10:28). Legalism combines the gospel with the law so that the gospel demands instead of freely gives. And, legalism diminishes the law and thereby fails to set forth the full the demands of the law. It makes a man think he only needs a life coach for moral improvement rather than a Savior for deliverance from judgment and condemnation.

Scholars have debated whether the Judaizers warned the Galatians of what was truly involved as a result of choosing circumcision. Clearly, the answer is no. Timothy George Writes, “If in urging circumcision on the Galatians the Judaizing teachers had claimed, ‘Paul has not explained to you the full demands of the gospel,’ for his part Paul replied, ‘They have not explained to you the full demands of the law’” (*Galatians*, pp. 358-359). Legalists never come out and say, “I want to bring you under and intolerable burden so you can be cursed.” It is always far subtler than that. E.P. Sanders suggests that Paul’s opponents adopted a policy of “gradualism” (see Fung, *Galatians*, p. 222). Concerning the Judaizers, James Boice writes, “...they were slyly proceeding step by step in their efforts to impose legalistic religion—first the feasts (4:10), then circumcision, and eventually the whole law” (*Galatians*, p. 488).

Whatever the precise method was, the point Paul is making is that the law requires 100% perfect obedience for your salvation. Under the law, there is no freedom until you have kept its precepts perfectly and paid all of its penalties in full. God’s law—which we are called to obey—is exceedingly broad. Fulfilling only one aspect of the law falls far short of the law’s requirement for perfect righteousness. Here then Paul reveals to us the unified nature of God’s law. Martin Luther remarks, “For he who accepts Moses in one part is obliged to accept him in all points” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 27, p. 15). All the individual parts of the Mosaic Law are linked to one another so that the one who binds himself to fulfill one aspect of the law binds himself to fulfill the whole law. James, the brother of Jesus (Matt. 13:55) writes in 2:10-11, “¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. ¹¹ For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.”

Even if you keep God’s law and only stumble in one point at one time in your life, James says you are guilty of breaking the whole law. You become a debtor who cannot pay the debt—and therefore will stand guilty without Christ on the day of judgment (see v. 2).

William Perkins writes, “The devil is able to bring a man to perdition as well by one sin, as by many” (*Galatians*, p. 333).

If then you choose to live under law, you will stand or fall by the law. Whoever is a debtor to the Law has no profit from Christ! God’s law shows no mercy to debtors. The Mosaic Covenant doesn’t grade on a curve but requires absolute, perfect, personal obedience to the whole Law. Therefore, legalism is an intolerable burden to bear because you have the unbearable obligation of earning God’s favor by fulfilling the law yourself (cf. Matt. 5:17-18; Gal. 3:10).

Building then on the first consequence, the Galatians would not only *lose* all the benefit of Christ but they would also *gain* an intolerable burden that they would be unable to bear. Peter teaches this at The Jerusalem Council when he declares, “Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?” (Acts 15:10).

There is no greater burden—yoke—you can bear than to be left with the obligation of achieving your own righteousness in order to stand before God in the final judgment. The day will come when a man must stand before God and give an account. On that day, Christ will be of no benefit to the one encompassed in theological legalism (shrouded in fig leaves of self-justification).

Clearly theological legalism is wrong—and deadly! But, as we have seen, even though we may not be guilty of theological legalism, we are often guilty of functional legalism, which renders Christ of no advantage for living the Christian life. As we consider then this second disastrous consequence, what are some ways that functional legalism creates in us a false sense of indebtedness/slavish obligation to God? How does functional legalism change us from being grateful responders into functional debtors?

REFLECTION:

1. WHEN YOU ALLOW YOUR CONSCIENCE TO BE UNLAWFULLY OPPRESSED BY THE USURPED CONDEMNATION OF THE LAW.

We looked at this last week, but it bears repeating because it is so common to our daily experience. Since Jesus’ sufficient sacrifice brings an end to any notion of debt in our relation to God it also then brings to an end all condemnation by God. If there is no debt then there is nothing to condemn. Paul in Romans 8:1 writes, “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

But, Graeme Goldsworthy writes how functional debtors like to atone for their sins by feeling guilty. Functional debtors like to feel battered and bruised for their sin. They like to be told what a hopeless bunch they are. They love to have the law laid down heavy and be told what to do to improve their pitiful spiritual lives. Why do functional debtors love this kind of treatment? Graeme Goldsworthy writes,

we love this kind of treatment because we are legalists at heart... 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).

In contrast to functional debtors, grateful responders trust in Christ alone who was condemned in their place. Second, we live as functional debtors—with a false sense of indebtedness/slavish obligation to God—when:

2. OUR LIVES ARE CONTINUALLY GOVERNED BY A SENSE OF “SHOULD” RATHER THAN “DONE.”

It is quite a popular but misguided notion to speak of the Christian as a debtor to God’s grace and mercy. Christians are often exhorted to consider how much they “owe” to God’s forgiving grace. Augustus Toplady’s hymn, “A Debtor To Mercy Alone,” is quite popular within conservative Evangelical churches but it makes the wrong connection in the first verse (Note: We shouldn’t discard this hymn but we should correct this wrong correlation).

To be sure, Christ’s gracious and merciful saving work calls forth a response but it is not one of debt but rather gratitude. We owe nothing to God’s grace. Grace eliminates all debt! Debt is the proper correlation to law but it is the wrong correlation to grace. Michael Horton points this out when he writes,

Jesus Christ alone offered a sufficient sacrifice for sin (Heb. 5:1; 9:26; 10:12), and this brings to an end any notion of debt in our relation to God. Therefore, the line from the hymn, “Come, Thou Fount” that says, “Oh! To grace, how great a debtor, daily I’m constrained to be,” makes the wrong connection. Debt is the wrong correlate to grace. We can never be debtors to grace: ‘Who has given a gift to Him, to receive a gift in return? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen’ (Rom. 11:35-36). We were once debtors to the law, but in Christ we are justified. Therefore, there is no debt relation to God whatsoever through faith in Christ” (*People and Place*, p. 299).

Yet, because we do not know the gospel well enough, we too often live as functional debtors to the demands of the Law rather than as grateful responders who are recipients of grace.

For example, we all know that we “should” love God and love others. In fact, we “must” do so (Cf. Matt. 22:37-40)! We know we “ought” to be patient, not be so quick to get angry with our children, not worry, give financially to the church, love our wives, submit to our husbands and encourage our spouses. Wives know they should be more intimate with their husbands and stop depriving them (1 Cor. 7). Christian parents know they

should catechize their children and spend more quality time with them. Believers know they should pray and share their faith, etc...

Such a nagging sense (“I must, ought, should”) of unfulfilled moral obligation to God has no motivational power. A sense of slavish duty cannot create and sustain true obedience. It is living by law, not gospel.

Paul Helm observes that such a way of life confines the believer to a moral or spiritual treadmill from which is not easy to escape. He says we come under bondage to a kind of enslaving “calculus” (see Paul Helm “Christian Hedonism” September 24, 2011, <http://www.credomag.com/2011/09/24/christian-hedonism>).

As a result, we live with a constant nagging sense of unfulfilled moral obligation before God. Our consciences, like Martin Luther, constantly calculate, “You have not done this correctly. You were not contrite enough. You omitted this in your confession. You didn’t have pure motives. You were not sincere enough. Your affections are divided and misplaced. Your desires are too small.”

Preachers can aid in this nagging sense of unfulfilled obligation by giving a constant diet of sermons that call into question one’s faith, commitment, sincerity, etc. In a recent article entitled, “Preaching Assurance vs. Preaching Doubt,” Gene Veith addresses this plaguing problem. He writes,

I have noticed that there are two kinds of preachers, especially when addressing young people: One kind tries to assure the listeners of their salvation in Christ, underscoring His grace and mercy and His atoning work on the Cross. The other kind tries to make the listeners question whether they are “really” Christians. (“Did you REALLY give your life to the Lord? Do you show the fruit of true faith? Does your life show evidence of true conversion? Maybe you need to commit your life to him again, just to be sure.”)

Granted the problem of nominal Christianity. And granted the need to make people realize how sinful they are so as to help them grasp their need of the Gospel. But I would argue that the latter approach can do great harm. The one thing that DOES make a Christian is faith in Christ. Doubt is the opposite of faith. To make a person doubt his or her salvation is, ironically, to destroy faith, rather than to build it up. Furthermore, these “are you really a Christian” messages have the effect of making the hearers look within, at their good works or their feelings or their piety or whatever. Surely, whenever we look honestly at ourselves we will find nothing to commend ourselves before God. Rather, what needs to happen is to encourage troubled or doubting souls to look OUTSIDE themselves to the Cross of Jesus and the promises of God’s Word, to objective facts about God’s disposition towards them (“Did God cause you to be baptized? Have you taken the Lord’s Supper and heard the words “given for you”?) (see <http://www.geneveith.com/2011/09/22/preaching-assurance-vs-preaching-doubt/#comments>).”

Such is the way functional legalism drags us back under a false obligation to the demands of God's law. Functional legalism makes the Christian life narrow and turns it into a restricted life driven by a slavish sense of obligation and joyless, duty. Functional legalism turns the church into a debtor's prison. It creates a debt economy where the believer is constantly aware of his sin and duty—mostly failure in duty!

In the face of such an enslaving way of life, Paul reminds us that it was for the purpose of freedom that Christ set us free (Gal. 5:1). Paul clearly tells us that all of salvation is outside of us (*extra nos*). It is an accomplished fact. Our salvation is done; complete in Christ. Because of God's saving work in Christ you are no longer a debtor to His justice. God will never demand of you a debt already paid. On the cross, Christ cried out, "It is finished!" (Cf. Jn. 19:30). Whatever debt we owed to God was canceled forever from His accounting ledger. Christ has fully satisfied divine justice therefore the account is settled. Paul in Colossians 2:14, says Christ has canceled "the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:14). As a result, we are no longer debtors to God's justice.

But, because of unbelief, we fall prey to functional legalism and live under a constant sense of legal necessity and slavish obligation. But as we just noted, such a sense of slavish duty (i.e., "I should, ought") has no motivational power. It is living by law, not gospel. The Great Commandment—like all the imperatives of Scripture—can tell us what we "must, ought or should" be doing. But, only the gospel can change our hearts so that the enslaving obligation of "I should" becomes the freeing, gospel-driven "I want." Only the gospel can make a heart confess, "I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart" (Ps. 40:8).

Slavish obedience flows from a debtor's heart. Grateful obedience flows from a gospel-saturated heart. As the *Gospel-Centered Life* study states, "[Is] joyless, mechanical obedience really honoring to Jesus? Did God intend His commands to feel like drudgery? When faced with this dilemma, most people settle for either legalism (obey even though you don't feel like it) or license (don't obey at all). But neither of these is the gospel! (*Lesson 7*, p. 69).

The gospel is the spring of obedience (Rom. 1:5; 16:26). It is the well from which our thirsty hearts drink deeply so that we may become grateful responders instead of living as slavish debtors. But, when our hearts are not constantly fed on good news, our love for God and service to others grinds to a halt (*GCL, Lesson 7*, p. 69).

Walking in freedom—a life expressed in loving and serving others rather satisfying selfish desires, Gal. 5:13-15—is the natural overflow—fruit—of the gospel. The way obedience grows in our lives—how we move from a slavish obligation of "I should" to a grateful response of "I want"—is by growing deeper in our understanding of the gospel. God's grace is the driving force of our sanctification rather than a "debtor's mindset"—an enslaving obligation of "I should." In Titus 2:11-13, Paul writes, "¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, ¹² instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, ¹³ looking

for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus...”

There are no debtors then in the covenant of grace (only under the covenant of works). The reason is because Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Law. The blood Moses threw on the people at Mount Sinai was fulfilled by Jesus at the Last Supper when He offered the cup and said, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28).

We need to understand and live daily in the reality that Jesus fulfilled our crushing debt of “I must” to God’s Law so that our enslaving “I should” can be changed into the gospel-freedom of “I want.”

Through His life (“active obedience), Jesus fulfilled the requirements demanded by the Law (Gal. 4:4). And, through His death (passive obedience), Jesus has paid the debt required by the Law (Gal. 3:13). Consequently, through faith—which brings us into union with Christ—we can “accurately say that when Jesus lived a perfect life, we lived a perfect life. When He died on the cross to suffer the penalty of sin, we died on the cross. All that Jesus did, we did, because of our legal union with Him” (Jerry Bridges, *The Gospel for Real Life*, p. 38).

Seeking to live under obligation to the Law is to live as if Christ has not yet come (see Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 27, p. 15). But, in the fullness of time Christ did come (Gal. 4:4; was sent by His Father). The Father sent Jesus to be born under law to redeem those under law (Gal. 4:4). The Father sent Jesus to redeem us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (Gal. 3:13). Thus, through His active obedience (“doing”) and passive obedience (“suffering”), Christ has fulfilled the Law.

Therefore, the church is not a community of debt but rather a community of grace. We are grateful responders instead of enslaved debtors! In light of this, ask yourself, “Can I say with certainty that my life pleases God?” Are you assured that you are in a state of grace rather than debt before God? Jerry Bridges asks,

Have you ever thought about the wonderful truth that Christ lived His perfect life in your place and on your behalf? Has it yet gripped you that when God looks at you today He sees you clothed in the perfect, sinless obedience of His Son? And that when He says, ‘This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased,’ He includes you in that warm embrace?” (*The Gospel for Real Life*, p. 39).

The extent to which you truly begin to understand this gospel truth is the extent to which you will stop living as a functional debtor and begin enjoying and walking in the freedom you have as a recipient of amazing grace!

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