

THREATS TO CHRISTIAN FREEDOM: LEGALISM
PART 7

TEXT: GALATIANS 5:2-12

October 23, 2011

INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:

What is a Christian? It is easy to assume that everyone knows what a Christian is. But, this is certainly not the case. The answer is not as easy as you might think. For example, one study reports that 85% of Americans claim to be Christians. 2/3 of Americans consider America a Christian nation.

For some, a Christian is one who has grown up in the church, been baptized and confirmed. For others, a Christian is someone of European descent. In America, an Evangelical Christian is often viewed as someone who only votes for the most conservative Republicans (the “Religious Right”). The question of whether or not Mormons are considered “Christians” has risen in considerable interest as of late due to Mitt Romney and the Republican Presidential primary.

So what is a Christian? How is a Christian defined? What does it really mean to be a Christian? In Galatians 5:5-6, Paul answers the question, “What is a Christian?” Before we look at Paul’s description, let’s briefly review what we have seen so far in Galatians 5:2-4. In vv. 2-4, Paul warns the Galatians of the destructive consequences of legalistic doctrine.

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

Specifically, he warns of three negative consequences for anyone who seeks to earn salvation by works (theological legalism). The three consequences are:

- A. CHRIST WILL BE OF NO BENEFIT IN THE FINAL JUDGMENT. V. 2
- B. BECOME A DEBTOR TO GOD’S LAW. V. 3
- C. SEVERED FROM CHRIST, V. 4

Implied in these negative consequences is what a Christian is not. And, so they raise some important questions. If a Christian is not one someone of whom Christ is of no benefit in the final judgment, if a Christian is not a debtor to the law, if a Christian is not severed from Christ and fallen from grace, what is a Christian?

Before continuing on to expose the depraved disposition of legalistic teachers in vv. 7-12, Paul contrasts the negative consequences of legalism in vv. 2-4 with the positive

characteristics that exemplify a true believer in vv. 5-6. Specifically, Paul cites four characteristics of a true Christian.

In verses 5-6, Paul summarizes the essence of the gospel and brings together the three most important graces that characterize a true Christian (i.e., faith, hope and love). F.F. Bruce characterizes these three graces as the “quintessence (the most perfect embodiment-J.F.) of the God-given life in Christ” (*Galatians*, p. 233).

The relationship between v. 4 and vv. 5-6 in effect is, “You* who attempt to receive salvation by keeping the law are separated from Christ, cut off from the realm of grace. But we are not cut off from Christ and we will not fall from grace. We do not choose legalism. For (γὰρ), “⁵ we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love” (*Note the change in pronouns from vv. 2-4, “you” to vv. 5-6 “we” is emphatic- it is in contrast to legalists—Judaizers).

With this context in mind, let’s see how Paul characterizes a Christian.

LESSON:

1. A TRUE CHRISTIAN LIVES BY THE SPIRIT. V. 5A

Paul begins, “For through/by the Spirit...” The Holy Spirit comes first because He is the primary fact of Christian existence (Betz, *Galatians*, p. 262). A Christian lives by virtue of the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Paul has already had much to say about the person and work of the Holy Spirit (cf. 3:1-5, 14; 4:6, 29; see also 5:16, 18, 22, 25; 6:1). For example, in 3:2, Paul reminds the Galatians of how they received the Holy Spirit at the beginning of their Christian life *by hearing* (i.e., the gospel) with faith rather than *by works* of the law (3:2). In 3:5, Paul discusses the ongoing, daily work of the Spirit in a believer’s life. In 4:29 (cf. 6:15), Paul states that a Christian is one who is brought to life by the supernatural work of the Spirit. In Galatians 5:22-23, we will see that the Holy Spirit is the source of true virtue (i.e., fruit of the Spirit).

This phrase, “through/by the Spirit” stands in contrast to “by the law” in v. 4. The idea is that the legalist (vv. 2-4) seeks salvation by law, which is to rely upon the flesh. Paul then is contrasting the Spirit with the flesh. In contrast to the Judaizers, Paul says a true Christian doesn’t put any confidence in the flesh (reliance upon works). “We” (i.e., Paul and true believers—Jew and Gentile) in contrast to the Judaizers do not place any confidence in the flesh but rather live by the Holy Spirit. In Philippians 3:3, Paul writes, “For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.”

Neither the law nor the flesh can give life/righteousness (Gal. 3:21). Apart from the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, the only actions a man can produce are works of the flesh (5:19-21). Jesus in John 6:63 taught, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all...” Living by the law is to live by the flesh (i.e., seeking God’s approval by

works). Living by the Spirit is to live by faith (i.e., receiving and resting in Christ alone for God's approval).

Throughout his letters, Paul frequently sets forth this contrast between the law and the Holy Spirit. For example, in Romans 8:2-3, Paul writes, “² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.” In 2 Corinthians 3:6, Paul says the law produces death but the Spirit gives life (“...the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”). The law kills because it announces God's will but doesn't grant the power to keep it. Therefore, the law brings a person under its curse (Gal. 3:13). The Holy Spirit alone gives life because only the Holy Spirit changes the heart and thereby enables a person to keep God's commands. Concerning the new covenant, God through Ezekiel promises, “I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes and be careful to obey My rules” (Ezek. 36:27).

The law enslaves but the Spirit brings freedom (Gal. 4:29; 5:1). In 2 Corinthians 3:17, Paul writes, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” Where the Holy Spirit is working He is bringing believers into an ever-increasing awareness that they are free from the Mosaic/old covenant, slavery to the demand for life, freedom from condemnation, freedom from the guilt of sin, death, blindness to the gospel and to the glory of Christ revealed therein (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18). Moreover, through the Spirit we become increasingly aware of the privileged access we have as adopted sons into the presence of God who is now our Father rather than our Judge (cf. Gal. 4:6).

So, Paul first shows that a true Christian is one who lives by the Spirit. Second, Paul shows that a true Christian lives by faith, v. 5b.

2. A TRUE CHRISTIAN LIVES BY FAITH. V. 5B

The term “faith” occurs 142 times in Paul's letters. It is used 22 times in Galatians (only Romans has more, 40xs). Faith is a theme of central importance in this letter (cf. 2:16, 20; 3:2, 5, 7, 8, 11, 12, 22, 24; 3:14, 26). Faith is the distinguishing mark of the believer. The whole Christian life can be summed up in this phrase, “by faith” (ἐκ πίστεως, cf. Hebrews 11 where “by faith” occurs 19 times in one chapter). Paul is arguing that a true Christian lives by faith in Christ rather than by confidence in works (contrasting with vv. 2-4).

What is faith? Faith is not a work but rather a gift (Eph. 2:8-9). God doesn't reward us with salvation because of our faith. Leon Morris writes, “It [faith-J.F.] is a refusal to see our merit as deserving salvation as a reward for our attitude, and it is a reliance on God alone to bring us out of our sin and into salvation” (*Galatians*, p. 156).

Faith is not the *efficient cause* of salvation (grace is the sole efficient cause of our salvation). Rather, faith is the *instrumental cause* of our salvation (i.e., the means by which we receive salvation, righteousness, eternal life). John Calvin defines faith as, “A

firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence (goodwill-J.F.) towards us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (*Institutes*, 3.2.7.).

Since faith is a gift rather than a work that we do, where does faith come from? How do we get faith? In Romans 10:17, Paul says "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through *the word of Christ*" (i.e., the gospel). The Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel and He confirms and strengthens it by the use of the sacraments (cf. HC, Q. 65). Faith, then, is brought about through the supernatural, gracious work of the Holy Spirit. By grace, the Spirit works in us what Christ purchased for us. Faith, Calvin teaches, arises in our hearts from God's promise of grace in Christ (*Institutes*, 3.2.7).

Faith causes us to put our trust in Christ rather than rely on our own effort. This is a supernatural work of the Spirit because all of us, due to sin, are by nature *self-reliant* rather than *Christ-dependent*. Living with a self-reliant, inward focus on the law comes naturally to our fallen flesh. But, living with a dependant, outward focus (i.e., by faith in Christ) comes supernaturally by the Spirit.

It is not natural for us to live in dependence upon another. Because of sin, we naturally seek to live by self-dependence. We Americans are proud. For example, I heard one cultural commentator this past week speaking about how Americans disdain "trust fund babies." We like to reward hard work. We like to believe in ourselves and live by the adage, "Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps." And thus in our prideful independence, we love to trust in what we do in order to earn God's favor and salvation.

In contrast, a Christian is graciously and supernaturally empowered by the Holy Spirit to live by faith in Christ and renounce all confidence in his own works. A Christian lives with an outward focus rather than inward focus. Faith is a self-emptying grace that is designed to humble the sinner and magnify the sufficiency of Christ. Walter Marshall in *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* writes, "This is the doctrine which glorifies God, and abases the creature; which is a mark of its truth," (p. 136). Concerning the righteousness of faith, Article 22 in the Belgic Confession teaches that true saving faith embraces Christ with all His merits and makes Him its own, and no longer looks for anything apart from Christ. A Christian then is one who obtains righteousness not by *doing* (works of the law) but through *believing* (faith) in Christ. All that is necessary for obtaining righteousness, writes Calvin, is a simple faith, which refuses the aid of "splendid ceremonies" (*Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 21, p. 151).

Now, note carefully how Paul says that salvation is not something we *slavishly work* for by the law for but rather *eagerly wait* for by faith. The verb, ἀπεκδεχόμεθα is used only here in the NT. It means "to await with eagerness" or "to be intently waiting" (Burton, *Galatians*, p. 278). True faith causes the believer to *wait eagerly* rather than to *work slavishly* for salvation.

A Christian is characterized by a contented discontentment. We wait eagerly because sin still clings to our flesh. A Christian longs to be done with his or her sin and eagerly waits for what he does not yet see (i.e., the perfection of his righteousness).

This leads us to a third mark of a true Christian.

3. A TRUE CHRISTIAN LIVES WITH HOPE. v. 5C

Paul writes, “For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for *the hope of righteousness*” (emphasis mine).

What is hope? Christian hope is not a mere wish, “I hope so.” Hope is not like throwing darts in the dark while blindfolded hoping you will hit the target. Rather, the Christian’s hope is a settled confidence; it is a certainty of things promised in the gospel. The reason for this certainty is because our faith is grounded on the unshakable foundation of justification. In Romans 5:1-2, Paul writes, “¹ Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ² Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”

Hope is the fruit of justifying faith. It cannot exist apart from faith. True justifying faith creates a confident hope of acceptance before God both now and in the future. A true Christian lives with hope—a settled confidence—rather than uncertainty concerning his eternal standing with God. In Romans 8:24, Paul says “in hope” we were saved (cf. 1 Pet. 1:3-5). A true Christian eagerly waits for the future with a confident expectation of good! A Christian then is marked by a *forward-looking* faith. He hopes that what he does not yet see will be made perfect and will be revealed in due time (see Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 27, p. 21).

What is it that the Christian eagerly waits in confident expectation for? Paul says both Jewish and Gentile Christians (“we ourselves”) “... eagerly wait for *the hope of righteousness*” (emphasis mine). First, to eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness doesn’t mean that a Christian doesn’t already possess righteousness. N.T. Wright has questioned the relationship of present justification to future justification. Regrettably, Wright teaches that the believer’s obedience becomes the basis for final justification rather than the imputed righteousness of Christ (Note: For a concise, helpful critique of Wright’s position see Michael Horton’s full review, *Justification by N.T. Wright*, <http://www.whitehorseinn.org/images/Horton-WrightReview.pdf>.)

The good news of the gospel is that a Christian has already received God’s verdict (i.e., a Christian is already justified through faith in Christ; Gal. 2:16; Rom. 5:1). The believer is already clothed in the imputed righteousness of Christ (Gal. 3:6; cf. Gen. 15:6). But, for now the Christian’s righteousness is hidden from the world and in fact is often hidden to some extent from the Christian.

There are at least two reasons for this. First, our righteousness is often hidden because for now it is grasped by faith rather than sight. We *already* possess an imputed righteousness but *not yet* a consummated righteousness (cf. Philip. 3:8-14). Second, there remains within us a continual war between the desires of the Spirit and flesh. Paul writes, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Gal. 5:17).

Because of this internal conflict between the Spirit and our flesh, we are often more conscious of our sin than we are conscious of righteous standing before God. Though we are justified by grace through faith, Martin Luther notes that we have only “received the first fruits of the Spirit; and the mortification of our flesh has begun. But we are not yet perfectly righteous. Our being justified perfectly still remains to be seen, and this is what we hope for. Thus our righteousness does not yet exist in fact, but it still exists in hope” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 27, p. 21).

The phrase then, “hope of righteousness” refers to God’s final, public vindication of righteousness. Paul is speaking of the future consummation of the Christian’s salvation. A Christian, because of the Spirit, eagerly waits in hope—confident expectation—for God’s final vindication (i.e., God’s final public verdict of the righteousness received through faith in Christ alone). For the Christian, God’s final judgment is nothing else than a public and solemn manifestation of His preceding judgments (see Francis Turretin, *Justification*, pp. 101-102).

Just like faith hope is also a work of the Holy Spirit. The law produces fear but the Spirit produces hope (cf. Rom. 8:15-16; Gal. 5:5). The Holy Spirit creates in a Christian an eager waiting and confident expectation for the perfection of the righteousness he now possesses by faith. Through the work of the Spirit, the Christian has no fear or expectation of God’s future condemnation (cf. Rom. 8:15). Instead, because of his Spirit-wrought faith, the Christian lives with a confident expectation of God’s final vindication.

Such a confident expectation is not true of the legalist, who has no benefit from Christ in the final judgment (cf. 5:2). God’s final judgment for all who have attempted to be justified by the law is eternal condemnation (cf. Matt. 7:23). Jesus will say to the legalist to depart because He does not recognize His works in him but rather see him clothed in his own self-righteous fig leaves (i.e., works of the law).

The Judaizers’ hope of righteousness was based on circumcision (i.e., “works of the law”). Paul, however, says that the Christian’s hope is based on grace and the work of Christ (God’s promise to Abraham that those who believe will be saved, 3:7, 14). A true Christian doesn’t base his hope for God’s present or future approval on his obedience (anything he does!). Hope is not found in religious activity, going to church, philanthropic acts of charity, community service, etc...

Rather, a true Christian bases his hope in Christ and in what Christ has done for him. Legalism cannot create certainty of God’s favor now or an eager expectation of good for

one's future. Why? The reason is because a legalist can never be sure he or she has done enough to earn God's favor and vindication. Legalism always produces an element of uncertainty because it is based on an imperfect righteousness. To live with an expectation of God's final vindication on the basis of law is not hope but rather presumption! To live by the law is to live in unbelief, which creates fear and uncertainty.

In contrast, to live by the Spirit is to live in faith, which creates hope—a confident expectation of certainty in regard to what God has promised in the gospel because it is based on a perfect righteousness. A true Christian then is *dependent, outward-focused* and *forward-focused*. A true Christian lives with a forward-looking faith—an eager expectation of God's final vindication of righteousness. A Christian doesn't fear the coming of Christ but eagerly awaits and longs for it (Rev. 22:20). A Christian lives with confidence for the Day of Judgment rather than fear (1 Jn. 4:17-18) because Paul Judgment Day for the Christian is *vindication* not *condemnation*!

REFLECTION:

As we think about the question, "What is a Christian?", so far we have seen that a Christian is:

One who lives *through the Spirit* (rather than the flesh) *by faith* (rather than works) *with hope* (rather than fear and uncertainty).

Such an understanding of a Christian is a very important and of great comfort, particularly when you are afflicted and disturbed by a sense of your sin. You must never judge your righteousness on what you see. Instead, you must base your faith and hope on the promise of the gospel, by which Christ and all of His perfect righteousness is promised to you.

We, who are justified now, through the Spirit eagerly wait by faith for the hope of the full unveiling of our righteousness in Christ. Though we possess an imputed righteousness, we eagerly await our glorification—the completed and perfected righteousness in the resurrection. Paul doesn't fully spell out in here in Galatians 5:5 what he means by this "hope." But, he does in Romans 8:18-39. As we close Listen as Paul lays out the believer's great hope:

“¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God... ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait eagerly for it with patience” (Roman 8:18-19, 23-25).

No amount of legalistic observance of law can produce this kind and eager waiting and confident expectation—hope—or the perfection of righteousness. The Good News of the Gospel is that all who are justified now will be vindicated then. Because of justification a Christian lives with confident expectation of future vindication rather than fear of eternal condemnation (Gal. 5:5). This is what the Christian through the Spirit by faith eagerly waits for with hope!

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