

THREATS TO CHRISTIAN FREEDOM  
PART 9

TEXT: GALATIANS 5:2-12

November 13, 2011

**INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:**

In Galatians 5:2-6, we saw how Paul warns the Galatians (and us!) of the destructive consequences of legalistic doctrine.

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

Now his argument in 5:7-12 shifts from the Galatians to the Judaizers. Threats to the Christian's walk come from both within (Acts 20:30; Gal. 5:17) and without (5:7-12). In vv. 7-12, Paul is responding to the threat that comes from without (i.e., legalistic teachers). Legalistic teachers pose a serious threat to the truth of the gospel and the Christian's freedom.

The Judaizers had infiltrated the young Galatian church plants soon after Paul's departure and immediately began distorting the gospel and thus troubling his new converts (cf. 1:7; 5:10, 12). Paul, therefore, responds with strong—even startling!—words for these legalistic teachers who were distorting the gospel and leading believers astray.

Like 4:12-20, we see the personal side of Paul as he expresses mixed, conflicting emotions ranging from comfort to anger and frustration to confidence in the Lord. Verses 7-12 serve as an implicit exhortation to resist all false teachers who seek to introduce legalism into the church (cf., Gal. 1:8-9; see Schreiner, *Galatians*, p. 321). To aid the Galatians in resisting these legalistic teachers, Paul exposes their depraved disposition.

**LESSON:**

II. PAUL EXPOSES THE DEPRAVED DISPOSITION OF LEGALISTIC TEACHERS. vv. 7-12

Specifically, Paul sets forth six characteristics of legalistic teachers. In doing so, he discredits the teachers as well as their enslaving message. First, Paul shows that legalistic teachers hinder obedience (v. 7).

A. HINDER OBEDIENCE, v. 7

Paul asks, "You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?" Paul uses an athletic metaphor and compares the Christian life as being like a footrace in a stadium (He also used this metaphor of his own apostolic service in 2:2). The term "hindered" (ἐνέκωψεν) is an athletic term. It means to "cut in front of a runner so as to trip him up" (Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 234).

Soon after Paul's departure, the Judaizers "cut in" (hindered) on the Galatians right after they began their race of "faith" (Gal. 3:1-5) by demanding that they submit to circumcision in order to secure the approval of God (i.e., justification).

Paul, thus in astonishment (cf. 1:6), asks rhetorically, "Who has cut in on you and prevented you from running well?" The Galatians got off to a great start (by faith) but legalistic teachers quickly (1:6) "cut in" on them on the racetrack and hindered them from "running well." "Running well" (Ἐτρέχετε καλῶς) means to respond to the gospel in faith (i.e., to receive and rest in Christ for righteousness rather than relying on one's own works for God's approval).

Having initially embraced the gospel by faith (3:2-3), the Judaizers—by demanding circumcision—were now hindering the Galatians from "obeying the truth" (i.e., running a race of obedience). "Truth" stands for "the truth of the gospel" (cf. 2:5, 14).

One might expect Paul to say here "believe rather than obey the truth of the gospel." But, this isn't the only time Paul speaks about obeying the gospel. For example, in 2 Thessalonians 1:8, Paul says that when Christ returns in flaming fire, He will inflict "vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus."

Obedience—like love—is a fruit of faith (cf. 5:6; Rom. 1:5; 16:26). Faith is the root and obedience is the fruit. Obedience is rendered by faith. If am to obey, I must have faith and my must be strengthened and assured. Faith, as we have learned, comes from the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and then strengthens and assures it by the use of the sacraments. (cf. Rom. 10:17; 1 Pet. 1:23-25; Matt. 28:19-20; 1 Cor. 10:16).

Thus, a life marked by obedience comes from repetition—continually hearing the gospel over and over again and having it confirmed repeatedly through the sacraments. What truly transforms us over a lifetime is a constant repetition of gospel saturation. This repetition is the essence of the church's liturgy—the repeated opportunity of hearing the gospel of Christ in joy, which forms our hearts in obedience (see Phillip Cary, *Good News for Anxious Christians*, p. 133).

In contrast, legalistic teachers hinder obedience, the very thing that is required by the law. Legalism hinders the gospel repetition. Note very carefully, the Galatians had been running well (believing/obeying) before the Judaizers led them astray by distorting the gospel.

This raises an important observation: distortion of the purity of the gospel is what hinders believers from running well. A distorted gospel hinders obedience—submitting of oneself to the truth of the gospel. In contrast, a pure gospel facilitates obedience. Legalism—and those who teach it—hinders obedience because it nullifies the grace of God and renders Christ's death pointless (Gal. 2:21).

The Law—in any form—can never produce obedience. The law never gives what it commands. All the law can do is demand obedience. In fact, because of sin—and apart from a self-consciously gospel-centered faith—the law actually gives occasion for sin and creates disobedience (Rom. 7:5, 14). But, through the gospel, you have both the wind and the tide pushing you forward in obedience (see Walter Marshall, *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, p. 112).

*Mark this: Believers “run well” when teachers proclaim and teach a pure gospel.*

The gospel—at the beginning, middle and end—is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16). This means the gospel not only brings us forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ (justification) but also power to obey God’s law (sanctification). Because the gospel is the ministry of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:8), when you trust in Christ alone you receive the Holy Spirit (Gal. 3:2, 14) who puts within you the desire to obey and enables you to obey (Ezek. 36:26-27).

Many people, however, think that the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone hinders obedience. Many think the free grace of God offered in the gospel turns people into disobedient—lawless—people. Therefore, like the Judaizers, legalistic teachers insist that the only way to get people to obey God’s law is to make their obedience a condition for receiving the blessings of salvation/God’s approval.

Because of a legal disposition, many find it hard to believe that they should get any blessing—be the recipients of God’s approval—before they work for it/deserve it. So, the legal heart concludes that the doctrine of justification will encourage people to live however they want and disregard obedience to the Law. But, the irony is that Paul says in v. 7 it is legalistic teachers that actually hinder obedience. Legalism turns people into disobedient, lawless people—or at best self-righteous hypocrites.

If legalism hinders obedience, the implied question here is, “What then facilitates, generates, motivates obedience?” The answer, Paul is arguing, is the gospel of Christian freedom. The heart that is free obeys! The heart that is enslaved disobeys! Walter Marshall writes,

You cannot truly live a holy life (i.e., a life lived in conformity to God’s law-J.F.) unless you are totally assured of your justification and reconciliation with God, totally apart from the works of the law. This is the only way you can truly obey the law! This is totally contrary, of course, to the way the world understands good works. Everyone outside the gospel of grace thinks that good works earn you God’s forgiveness. However, the gospel does not conform to worldly wisdom. The gospel says that when you are firmly assured of God’s love for you, you will respond by living a holy life. If you do not understand God’s love for you, you will fall into a sinful life (*The Gospel Mystery*, pp. 29-30).

The first characteristic then of legalistic teachers is that they hinder obedience.

## REFLECTION:

As we reflect on this first characteristic, it is far too important to leave it and move on. The question that begs to be answered here is: *How do I obey?*

In v. 6, Paul says that what counts is faith working through love. In the same way, faith also works through obedience. Obedience—like love—is a fruit of justifying faith. Obedience is a necessary part of the salvation one receives through faith in Christ. Where there is no obedience there is no justifying faith (cf. 1 Jn. 2:3-6). So, we must obey. However, as we have seen, obedience is not the condition that earns our salvation but rather the evidence of our salvation. Since then obedience is necessary, the question is how do I obey?

How, for example, do I possess a faith that expresses itself in love for my neighbor (Gal. 5:6)? Consider briefly two the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Commandments listed in the second table of the Law that we are to obey—ways to love our neighbor (Note: Paul refers to these in Galatians).

1. The Sixth Commandment: “You shall not murder” means I am not to dishonor, hate, injure, or kill my neighbor by thoughts, words, or gestures, and much less by deeds, whether personally or through another rather, I am to put away all desire of revenge. Moreover, I am not to harm or recklessly endanger myself. But, it is not enough that we do not kill our neighbor in any such way. When God condemns envy, hatred, and anger, He commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves, to show patience, peace, gentleness, mercy, and friendliness toward him, to protect him from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies (see *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. 105-107, cf. Gal. 5:19-21).
2. The Eighth Commandment: “You shall not steal” means God not only forbids outright theft and robbery. He also forbids all greed and all abuse or squandering of His gifts. He requires us to promote our neighbor’s good wherever we can and may and to work faithfully so as to be able to always give to those in need (see *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. 110-111; cf. Gal. 6:9-10; Eph. 4:28).

Jesus summarized the second table of the Law as “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39; Gal. 5:14). He instructed do to others as you would have them do to you, without partiality or self-seeking (Matt. 7:12; Gal. 6:1-2). As we have just seen, these commandments are listed by Paul in Galatians 5-6 as evidence of faith working through love. The question before us is how do you obey these requirements to love your neighbor?

To be sure, obedience is certainly not by a legal method, which Paul says hinders obedience. Seeking to obey out of sheer duty, slavish obligation/will-power/self-discipline (“Just do it”) is like trying to sail a sailboat on the open seas in a nearly dead calm. Yet, so many of us are like the Galatians. We got off to a good start and began running well (living by faith). At the beginning of our Christian life, we were thrilled that

our sins were forgiven. We had assurance that we stood before God totally accepted because of Christ. Our hearts were filled with joy and gratitude and thus we possessed zeal to live for the Lord. But, then at some point, someone “cut in” in on us and redirected our attention to a list of “how-tos” for discipleship that left us to ourselves and cut us off from Christ.

Somehow, we—like the Galatians—came to think that we received Christ by faith once at the beginning of our Christian lives and then must go on to do the real work of discipleship through our good works. As a result, we become like a sail boat in the open seas helpless to move forward because of a nearly still calm.

So what do we do—or perhaps what have we been exhorted to do? We turn the sailboat into a rowboat! But, rowing the boat—trying very hard to obey—is trying to be made perfect in the flesh (Gal. 3:3). As a result, we become spiritually exhausted and fall into despair. Or we delude ourselves into thinking we are actually sailing again and become obnoxiously self-righteous and end up disregarding God’s law—guilty of license.

Somewhere along our race we got tripped up into thinking that “law” will provide us the “practical” techniques to become more obedient, faithful, loving, caring, giving, generous, forgiving, etc... But, as John Murray notes, the law cannot do any more in sanctification than it did in justification (see *Principles of Conduct*, ch. 8, “Law and Grace”).

What we need to understand is that nothing we do can ever get the boat sailing again. What we really need is repetitive fresh gusts of wind in our sails (see Horton, *God of Promise*, p. 194). Where then do repeated fresh gusts of wind come from so we can start sailing again (i.e., “running well”)? The answer is that we must continue the race just like we started (i.e., we must run by faith in the gospel to obey; Gal. 3:1-5). The gospel—as we previously noted—is the ministry of the Spirit. He fills up our sails again and again through hearing the gospel rather than trying to live up to the demands of the law. Grace, John Murray observes, doesn’t relieve us of the demands signaled in God’s law but rather establishes the character and status which will bring about the Law’s demands to effective fruition (*Principles of Conduct*, p. 193).

What then does it look like to live by faith in the gospel? Consider the following example by Walter Marshall of what it looks like to live by faith in the gospel in order to obey God’s law. He writes that in order to love your neighbor as yourself, you

have to be assured of the privileges and blessings you have through your new state in Christ. Only this will encourage and empower you to love your neighbor as yourself...If you really want to love your neighbor, you have to live by the gospel. Believe that these commands are the will of your heavenly Father, who has recreated you in His own image, in righteousness and true holiness. Believe that they are the mind of Christ, who lives in you, and in whom you live. Believe that God [the Father] and Christ are kind, tenderhearted, longsuffering, and full of goodness to men—whether they are good or bad, friends or enemies. Believe that

Christ came into the world, not to destroy but to save. Believe that the injuries done to you by others cannot harm you. Believe that you do not seek any good for yourself by injuring others, because all your happiness and satisfaction come from Christ. Believe that all things, even if your enemies intend them to hurt you, work for your good through Christ. If you believe these things by faith, you will be empowered and equipped to love and do good to your neighbor.” Do you want to have a pure love towards your brothers in Christ? Do you want to live with them in all humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness and love? Then believe that you are inseparably joined with them through Christ. Believe that there is ‘one body and one spirit, one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all through all and in all’ (Ephesians 4:4-6)” (*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, p. 187).

This is how we live by faith in the gospel in order to love our neighbor as ourselves. We stir ourselves up by faith in the gospel in order to carry out obedience to the Law. The gospel comforts our anxious hearts, draws back our rebellious, licentious hearts, and motivates us by joy to walk in God’s ways. Thus, it is disastrous to preach the law as the condition (justification) and power (sanctification) for life since it hinders believers from giving obedience to God. The law should never be given a condemning power over the conscience of those who trust in Christ. This is a guaranteed way to hinder obedience to the truth.

One of the ways this happens “functionally” is what Phillip Cary calls “The Application Trap.” He explains:

The ‘application’ part of the sermon works by making people anxious about whether they’re living the way ‘we as Christians’ are supposed to: faithful, loving, caring, experiencing the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and so on. It’s a trap. Either you believe that stuff about yourself, which makes you self-righteous, or you don’t, which makes you anxious. Either way you’re stuck. You can try to convince yourself you’re oh-so loving (so much more than your neighbors—now isn’t that nice!) or you can worry about how shabby your Christian life is (haunted by that feeling, ‘what’s wrong with me?’). There’s no escaping the trap unless you believe that Christ came to save sinners and that includes you. As the apostle Paul wonderfully put it: ‘Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost’ (1 Tim. 1:15)...

Such a comfort that is—you don’t have to play the game of showing that you’re as loving, caring, and faithful as ‘we as Christians’ are supposed to be. That’s not in fact who we are. We are more like Paul, the foremost of sinners, or Peter, who denied Christ. But these are the same Peter and Paul that Christ called to be his apostles. It’s okay to be in the same boat with them, rather than plunging into a sea of anxiety as we attempt to convince ourselves that ‘we as Christians’ are doing a better job than the apostles did.

So, here is another thing that the preachers who want to be ‘practical’ don’t get. They are apt to conclude the sermon with an application that goes like this: ‘We need to ask ourselves: Am I really following Christ, focusing on Him, loving God with my whole heart, caring about my neighbor,’ etc. The most truthful answer to such questions is surely, ‘Of course not! I’m not like that!’ But then I want to ask the preacher, ‘Now do you have any good news for sinners like me?’ Unfortunately, there’s usually no good news coming, because that’s the end of the sermon. The whole point is to throw the ball in our court and see what we can do with it. It’s a practical sermon, so it leaves us trapped, left to our own resources and cut off from Christ” (*Good News For Anxious Christians*, p. 170).

So what is the “application” part for us? The application is this:

*The Christian runs well through nurturing gospel repetitiveness.*

This is why Paramount’s vision statement reads:

Our mission is worked out by giving all people the *repeated opportunity* to HEAR (Eph. 1:13; Rom. 10:13-17; Gal. 3:2), BELIEVE (1 Cor. 15:1; Jn. 3:16; 20:31; Gal. 1:9, 12), ENJOY (Ps. 16:11; Rom. 11:33-36), and PROCLAIM (Mk. 16:15; Rom. 1:15) the Gospel of Christ (emphasis mine).

So, when you find yourself caught in a nearly “dead calm”—either by despair or disregard of God’s law—what you need, Michael Horton writes,

“is to be told all over again about who God is and what He has done to save you, and about the new world that awaits you because of His faithfulness to unfaithful sailors. This alone will fill your sails so that you can get safely back to the harbor when the gales blow hard.

Our whole life as Christians is a process of sailing confidently into the open seas, dying down in exhaustion, and having our sails filled again with God’s precious promises. We are never at any moment simply under full sail or dead in the water, but move back and forth throughout the Christian life. This is the movement that we find in Romans 6-8, from the triumphant indicative (Rom. 6:1-11), to the moral imperatives (Rom. 6:12-14), back to the indicatives (6:15-7:6), to the exhausting struggle with sin (7:7-24), back again to the triumphant indicative, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (7:25) and the future hope awaiting us for which even now we have the Spirit as a down payment (8:1-39) (*God of Promise*, p. 194).

Remember: Legalism hinders obedience; repetitive gospel-saturation facilitates it!

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