

THREATS TO CHRISTIAN FREEDOM: LEGALISM

PART 11

TEXT: Galatians 5:2-12

November 20, 2011

INTRODUCTION/REVIEW

- I. PAUL WARNS AGAINST THE DESTRUCTIVE CONSEQUENCES OF LEGALISTIC DOCTRINE (VV. 2-6).
- II. PAUL EXPOSES THE DEPRAVED DISPOSITION OF LEGALISTIC TEACHERS (VV. 7-12).

Verses 7-12 serve as an implicit exhortation to resist all false teachers who seek to introduce legalism into the church. To aid in resisting legalistic teachers, Paul exposes their depraved disposition by setting forth six characteristics of legalistic teachers. First, we saw that legalistic teachers hinder obedience (v. 7).

A. HINDER OBEDIENCE, V. 7

In v. 7, Paul speaks of the Christian life as a race, which is more like a marathon than a sprint. As soon as the Galatians heard and received by faith the gospel, they were off and running well. But, almost immediately out of the starting blocks they were “hindered” from “running well” (i.e., obeying). Legalistic teachers “cut in” on them by demanding that the Galatians add the Law of Moses to the gospel. Paul states that such a mingling of the law and gospel hinders believers from obeying the truth of the gospel.

Legalism leads to license. Timothy George observes, “By undermining their confidence in sound doctrine, satan seduced them into loose living” (*Galatians*, p. 364). The Christian “runs well” by nurturing gospel repetitiveness rather than submitting to legalistic indebtedness. A question raised by this first characteristic is: Where does such legalism come from?

This leads us to a second characteristic of legalistic teachers.

LESSON:

B. NOT FROM GOD, V. 8

Paul writes, “This persuasion is not from Him who calls you.”

Legalistic teachers are to be totally resisted because they are not from God. Paul's statement is intended to remind the Galatians of their initial gospel awakening, which brought about both their conversion and obedience to God (cf. 3:1ff). But soon after, the Judaizers "cut in" and began persuading the Galatians to move away from faith in Christ alone and to adopt a position of faith in Christ plus the keeping of the law.

The Judaizers sought to persuade the Galatians that circumcision was necessary in order to gain God's approval. Therefore, they based salvation on a deadly combination of grace and works rather than grace alone. But, grace is unmerited favor, something we can't earn or deserve. Salvation is either by grace or by works but it can't be a combination of both as Paul says in Romans 11:6, "if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace." John Stott writes,

"Circumcision stands for a religion of human achievement, of what man can do by his own good works; Christ stands for a religion of divine achievement, of what God has done through the finished work of Christ. Circumcision means law, works and bondage; Christ means grace, faith and freedom. Every man must choose. The one impossibility is what the Galatians were attempting, namely to add circumcision to Christ and have both. No. Circumcision and Christ are mutually exclusive" (*Galatians*, p. 138).

Obviously, then, God is not the one who is persuading the Galatians to combine the law and gospel, which hinders obedience (leads to license) rather than motivates it. Therefore, Paul says, "This persuasion is not from Him who calls you."

How did God call the Galatians? In 1:6, Paul says God effectually called the Galatians in grace, which in turn empowered them to run well (i.e., obey by faith). Grace is how God always calls believers to salvation. In 1 Peter 5:10, Peter says that God is the "God of all grace" (1 Pet. 5:10). God is inclined to deal with us by grace from the beginning, middle and end of our salvation.

How can God give us grace rather than what we deserve? In Acts 15:11, Peter at The Jerusalem Council, says, "...we believe that we (Jews) will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they (Gentiles) will." Because God's justice has been satisfied through Christ grace—unmerited favor to those who deserve justice—comes to us through Jesus.

Paul in Ephesians 1:7-8a writes, "⁷ In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, ⁸ which He lavished upon us..." Because of Christ, God the Father can deal with us in grace, both in justification and in our day-to-day relationship with Him. God never calls a person to faith and obedience by the demand of the law, "Do this and live."

Rather, Paul clearly says he calls us to faith and obedience in the realm of Christ's grace—"Live, now do this" (see Schreiner, *Galatians*, p. 85). If then this persuasion doesn't come from God, where does it come from? Ultimately, Paul is implying that this persuasion comes from our great spiritual adversary, satan, whoever the human agents are that "hinder" us (see Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 234). For example, in 2 Thessalonians 2:18, Paul writes, "we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but satan hindered us."

Paul's statement in v. 8 is quite remarkable. He is saying that God who calls in grace doesn't speak through legalistic teachers. When you hear the enslaving, condemning demands of legalistic teachers you are not hearing the voice of Christ calling but rather the devil (see Betz, *Galatians*, p. 265, n. 121 and Bruce, *Galatians*, p. 234).

The devil's chief strategy is to persuade you to trust in yourself rather than in Christ. He works to develop false ideas about Christ and then to persuade you every way he can to keep you from trusting in Christ alone.

FOR EXAMPLE, HE WILL PERSUADE YOU THAT YOUR SIN AND GUILT ARE TOO GREAT FOR GOD TO FORGIVE YOU. Martin Luther writes,

"For the devil is a highly skilled persuader; he knows how to inflate a minute and almost ridiculous peccadillo (a minor/slight offense/slip-J.F.) until the one who has been tempted supposes it to be the most heinous offense, worthy of eternal punishment. Here the troubled mind should be encouraged in the manner in which Paul encouraged the Galatians, namely, by being told that this thought or persuasion does not come from Christ; for it conflicts with the Word of the Gospel, which portrays Christ, not as an accuser or a harsh taskmaster but as 'gentle and lowly in heart' (Matt. 11:29), as merciful Savior and Comforter" (*Luther's Works*, vol. 27, pp. 33-34).

In John 12:47, Jesus referring to His first coming says, "...I did not come to judge the world but to save the world" (Note: He will judge in His 2nd Coming, see 12:48; 5:22, 27-30).

OTHERS ARE PERSUADED TO THINK THAT THEY ARE NOT "WORTHY" OR "GOOD ENOUGH" OR THAT THEY MUST "CLEAN UP THEIR ACT" BEFORE THEY COULD EVER POSSIBLY BE USED BY GOD.

Jerry Bridges discusses this problem in his book, *The Discipline of Grace*. He writes,

Consider to radically different days in your own life. The first one is a good day spiritually for you. You get up promptly when your alarm goes off and have a refreshing and profitable quiet time as you read your Bible and pray. Your plans for the day generally fall into place, and you somehow sense the presence of God with you. To top it off, you unexpectedly have an

opportunity to share the gospel with someone who is truly searching. As you talk with the person, you silently pray for the Holy Spirit to help you and to also work in your friend's heart.

The second day is just the opposite. You don't arise at the first ring of your alarm. Instead, you shut it off and go back to sleep. When you finally awaken, it's too late to have a quiet time. You hurriedly gulp down some breakfast and rush off to the day's activities. You feel guilty about oversleeping and missing your quiet time, and things just generally go wrong all day. You become more and more irritable as the day wears on, and you certainly don't sense God's presence in your life. That evening, however, you quite unexpectedly have an opportunity to share the gospel with someone who is really interested in receiving Christ as Savior.

Would you enter those two witnessing opportunities with a different degree of confidence? Would you be less confident on the bad day than on the good day? Would you find it difficult to believe that God would bless you and use you in the midst of a rather bad spiritual day?

If you answered yes to those questions, you have lots of company among believers. I've described these two scenarios to a number of audiences and asked, 'Would you respond differently?' Invariably, about 80 percent indicate that they would. They would be less confident of God's blessing while sharing Christ at the end of a bad day than they would after a good one (pp. 13-14).

The truth is if our usefulness is dependant upon our "performance", we would be utterly useless because even our "best works" are intermixed and filled with sin. Thus, John Owen writes,

"Believers obey Christ as the one by whom our obedience is accepted by God. Believers know all their duties are weak, imperfect and unable to abide in God's presence. Therefore they look to Christ as the one who bears the iniquity of their holy things, who adds incense to their prayers, gathers out all the weeds from their duties and makes them acceptable to God" (Communion with God, p. 117).

STILL OTHERS ARE PERSUADED TO THINK THE PROMISES OF THE GOSPEL APPLY TO EVERYONE BUT THEM, "I'M SO BAD, THE PROMISE OF THE GOSPEL CANNOT POSSIBLY APPLY TO ME. IT CAN'T BE TRUE OF FOR ME."

SOME BELIEVERS HAVE BEEN PERSUADED TO THINK THAT THEY ARE WORSE THAN ANYONE ELSE, "CERTAINLY NO ONE COULD HAVE AS BAD A HEART AS I DO AND STRUGGLE WITH THE THINGS THAT I STRUGGLE WITH."

But, the truth is everyone has the same equally corrupt fountain of sin in his or her heart (cf. Jer. 17:9; 1 Cor. 10:13). In 1 Timothy 1:15-16, Paul reminds Timothy,

¹⁵ The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶ But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life.

Paul says Christ saved him to demonstrate to everyone that no one is beyond the reach of God's grace, however great a sinner they may be. Walter Marshall writes, "The purpose of God in salvation is to 'show the exceeding riches of His grace' through your salvation (Ephesians 2:7). God's grace is most glorified when He pardons the worst sinners" (*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, p. 156).

All of the preceding examples flow from unbelief. Each one illustrates different ways believers are "persuaded" to live by and relate to God on the basis of works rather than grace. Unbelief is the most destructive sin of all; it is the root of all our other sins. Because of unbelief, we have forgotten that we only relate to God on the basis of grace alone. When we fail to believe that the promises of the gospel are really true "for me," we undervalue God's grace; we are dishonoring Christ and His saving work.

When we live by our performance, we deprive ourselves of the infinite merit of Christ's life and saving work and the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. So, whenever you are persuaded to trust in yourself and to mistake the voice of Christ for a relentless accuser and harsh taskmaster, know that this persuasion is not from God who calls you in grace.

If left unchecked, what effect do legalistic teachers have on the church? This leads us to a third characteristic. Legalistic teachers are to be resisted because they corrupt the church.

C. CORRUPT THE CHURCH, V. 9

"A little leaven leavens the whole lump."

Paul switches metaphors from athletics in v. 7 to baking in v. 9. He moves from the track to the kitchen. He quotes a well-known Proverb to illustrate the ill effects of legalistic teachers.

Bread making would have been a common feature in most households. (Note: Paul may also perhaps have had in mind the Jewish Passover (cf. Ex. 12:15). Just as leaven was forbidden to be used in bread in a Jewish house on Passover Eve, so legalism is to be forbidden to invade the church.)

“Leaven” (fermented dough) in this context stands for the legalistic doctrine of the Judaizers (adding works to faith as the basis for justification; Note: in 1 Cor. 5:6 it refers to immorality in the church). One of the deadly things about false teaching/legalism is that it spreads. Legalism is like leaven. Just as a pinch of leaven eventually spreads throughout the whole loaf, so just a dose of legal doctrine will eventually end up corrupting the whole church.

We must take note that the devil’s strategy for corrupting the gospel and church is always subtle. His tactic in Galatia was not an outright denial of the gospel but rather a subtle yet deadly supplementation of the gospel. John Calvin writes, “satan’s strategem is, that he does not attempt an avowed destruction of the whole gospel, but he taints its purity by introducing false and corrupt opinions. Many persons are thus led to overlook the seriousness of the injury done, and therefore make a less determined resistance” (*Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 21, p. 154). Philip Ryken observes, “False doctrine usually does not sound all that false at the beginning. ‘Justified by faith’ or ‘justified by faith alone,’ people say, ‘Who cares?’” (*Galatians*, p. 209). The answer is God cares!

The point Paul is making is this: whenever works (leaven) are added to grace (dough) grace is eventually completely overtaken by works and Christ is removed. Legalistic teachers are to be resisted because legalism in all its forms will spread its corruption throughout the entire church if left unchecked. Theodore Beza writes, “We must pay great attention to these things. For, with good reason, we can say that ignorance of this distinction between Law and Gospel is one of the principle sources of the abuses which corrupted and still corrupt Christianity” (*The Christian Faith*, p. 41).

As we have seen throughout our study of Galatians, the subtle yet corrupting error of the Judaizers was the combining together of the law and gospel, which destroys grace and the possibility of freedom. The blending of law and gospel is a deadly mixture that corrupts the purity of the gospel and the church. What are some of the corrupting effects of legalistic teachers?

- distort the gospel (1:7),
- destroy the unity of the church (2:1-10),
- trouble believers’ souls (1:7; 5:10),
- annul grace, make it of no consequence (2:21a)
- render Christ’s death pointless/unnecessary (2:21b)
- bring people under a curse (3:10) rather than blessing (3:13-14)
- lead to bondage rather than freedom (5:1)
- hinder obedience (5:7)
- corrupt the church (5:9)
- unsettle hearts (5:12)
- and disrupt the fellowship of the church (5:15)

All of this trouble stems from one subtle yet corrupting error (i.e., Christ plus the law = justification instead of Christ alone). This is why Calvin warns that once the gospel has been corrupted, “we are no longer safe” (*Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 21, p. 154).

REFLECTION:

As we reflect on Paul’s characteristics of legalistic teachers, we gain several important insights.

1. FIRST, THE HOLY SPIRIT LEADS US TO OBEDIENCE BY LOVE NOT LAW, GRACE NOT GUILT.

The Law in the hand of Christ no longer condemns believers but simply reveals God’s wisdom for daily living. The Law is good, if you use it lawfully (1 Tim. 1:8), which means in the context of sanctification you must use it in light of the gospel. Therefore, the Law should never be given a condemning power over the conscience of those who trust in Christ, which hinders obedience. The author of Hebrews tells us that God delivers His commands to us not from Mt. Sinai, blazing with smoke, but from Mt. Zion, with Christ the Mediator of a better covenant (Heb. 12:18-24). Because of this, you can be certain that God doesn’t call you by grace and then drive you like a slave in order to obey! This kind of persuasion hinders obedience and does not come from the God who calls sinners by grace (Note: *πεισμονή* (persuasion) is the only Pauline and NT occurrence of this term).

Obedience to the truth of the gospel (“running well”) comes from Him who calls you by grace. Walter Marshall writes,

“It is the work of the Holy Spirit to be your guide and your comforter. He is not a spirit of bondage, but He is the Spirit of Adoption (Romans 8:15). Peace and joy are plentiful on this path of holiness (Philippians 4:4-6). God does not drive you along with whips and terrors, or by the rod of the schoolmaster, the law. Rather, He leads you and draws you to walk in His ways by pleasant attractions (2 Corinthians 5:15; Romans 12:1) (*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, p. 236).

In Romans 5:2, Paul speaks of “this grace in which we stand.” Here Paul speaks of our day-to-day standing before God as being on the same basis as our initial justification. The grace by which we were justified is also the grace by which we are driven to live by faith in Christ every day. In Galatians 2:20, Paul writes, “...the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. For Paul, the grace of justification was not merely a past reality that had no present bearing on his daily walk. The grace of justification was also a present reality that influenced and motivated his life on a daily basis. Every day, instead of

looking inside of himself (his works good or bad) Paul looked outside of himself to Jesus Christ for his ongoing acceptance and motivation for obedience.

2. **NOSECOND, YOU CAN DISCERN WHETHER OR NOT A TEACHER IS SENT BY GOD BY THIS SIMPLE TEST: DOES WHAT I HEAR PERSUADE MY HEART TO OBEY OR DISOBEY?**

Ask yourself, “Does the teaching I receive endear my heart to God? Is my heart persuaded by the Holy Spirit to obey willingly or begrudgingly? Is my desire to walk in holiness a pleasure and delight? Or, do I possess a continual sense of slavish duty; a nagging sense of “oughtness, should or must.”

Are the duties of the Christian life burdensome or pleasant to you? You can know it is the voice of Christ persuading you because you are not paralyzed by fleshly fear, regret, and grief, all of which hinder you from obeying and are born out of trying to use the law to stop sinning. Moreover, you can know it the voice of Christ persuading you because you are freed from disobedience (license). Christ’s voice of grace persuades a heart to obey the truth rather than revolt against it (cf. 5:12).

Your cold, indifferent heart is cheered and motivated to pursue obedience rather than disobedience to love your neighbor; your lusts and the fleeting pleasures of sin are restrained and mortified in Christ. You begin to look upon the things you know you “ought” to be doing not with indifference or as a burden but rather a privilege.

All of this is the work of the Holy Spirit, who through the gospel calls and persuades you by grace and thereby builds you up and increases your faith.

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