

PAUL: THE SPIRITUAL ABOLITIONIST, PART II
NOT MAN'S GOSPEL!, PART 27

TEXT: GALATIANS 2:11-21

October 18, 2009

REVIEW:

- I. PAUL CONFRONTS PETER'S CONTRADICTION OF THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL (2:11-13).
- II. PAUL CLARIFIES PETER'S CONTRADICTION OF THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL (2:14-21).
 - A. PAUL'S QUESTION, v. 14
 - B. PAUL'S THESIS, vv. 15-16

INTRODUCTION:

Two criticisms that inevitably arise from a legalistic heart when the gospel is preached are novelty and license.

1. NOVELTY

Paul has already addressed the objection of novelty at the end of v. 16 when he quotes from Psalm 143:2 to confirm the doctrine of justification by faith alone from the authority of Scripture. Paul's use of the OT confirms that the doctrine of justification by faith alone is not a novel doctrine.

Yet, the gospel in all ages is brought under much criticism and suspicion, as if it were some new, novel dangerous teaching. The accusation of novelty was charged to Christ in Mark 1:27 and it was made by the Athenians against Paul in Acts 17:19-20.

At the time of the Reformation, the Roman Catholics brought the charge of novelty against the Reformer's doctrine of justification. James Buchanan writes,

“The chief ground of their opposition to it, at that time, was its alleged ‘novelty,’ as a method of teaching which was now introduced for the first time, and which was at direct variance with that which had long prevailed in the Romish Church. It was this doctrine, more than any other, that excited the hostility both of the Papal See, and of the Imperial Diet; and the Reformers were made to feel that, unless they could consent to abandon, or at least to modify it, they must expose themselves and their cause to imminent danger. ‘It cannot be denied,’ says Melancthon, ‘that we are brought into trouble, and exposed to danger, for this one

only reason, that we believe the favour of God to be procured for us, not by our observances, but for the sake of Christ alone.' . . . 'If the exclusive term, only, is disliked, let them erase the Apostle's corresponding terms, freely, and without works. In reply to the charge of novelty, they admitted that the doctrine might be new to many in the Church of Rome, since it had long been obscured and corrupted by the false teaching and superstitious practices which generally prevailed,- but affirmed, that it was as old as the Gospel of Christ and His Apostles, to which they fearlessly appealed," (*The Doctrine of Justification*, pp. 128-129).

Still today, in response to the gospel awakening that is occurring, one hears the charge of novelty in statements such as, "They are on that gospel kick. All this gospel talk is simply a fad. It will wear off."

The charge of novelty is simply the natural bias of the fallen heart towards legalism. People and churches so naturally fall into legalism, that when there is a recovery of the gospel, it is branded with the false charge of novelty.

The second criticism that arises in opposition to the gospel is license.

2. LICENSE

We have spent the past several weeks examining Paul's thesis (vv. 15-16) in detail. Three times Paul emphasizes in v. 16 that works play no role in a man's justification. And, three times Paul emphasizes that justification is by means of faith in Christ alone, thus down playing works further.

The gospel, as we saw last week in passages like Isaiah 55 and Matthew 11:28 holds forth the free promise of forgiveness and life to all sinners.

"Come everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price," (Isa. 55:1).

It is this "freeness" in Paul's thesis statement that so strongly refuted the Judaizer's legalistic false gospel. However, at the same time, this "freeness" opened the door for Paul's opponents to charge him with license, (i.e., "Justification is free. God loves me unconditionally, therefore, He doesn't care what I do.")

This distortion of the gospel is also known as antinomianism, which means "against law." Simply put, antinomianism is a disregard of God's law.

Paul denounces works so strongly his opponents (i.e., Judaizers) twisted his teaching to mean that works (obedience to the Law) have no place at all in the believer's life. They charged that his gospel of grace encouraged men and women to disregard the law and continue in sin.

Such is the charge that legalistic hearts always bring against the startling, staggering good news that God freely justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5).

Paul's opponents falsely reasoned:

“Your doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Christ alone is a dangerous doctrine. If God declares sinful people righteous by grace through faith in Christ apart from anything they do, you actually encourage people to disregard obedience to the law. If all works are excluded, why seek to do good works or pursue holiness? What kind of motivation will people have to pursue holiness and obedience? This teaching just makes people lazy, careless and sinful. This is a great deal, ‘I sin and God forgives.’ If God accepts a man through faith in Christ apart from works people will think they live as they please.”

Paul, in vv. 17-21, takes up this criticism and answers it directly. It needs to be understood that true gospel preaching is always susceptible to this kind of misunderstanding and false charge. If it isn't, then the gospel is not really being preached.

Listen carefully to Martyn Lloyd Jones,

“First of all, let me make a comment, to me a very important and vital comment... There is no better test as to whether a man is really preaching the New Testament gospel of salvation than this, that some people might misunderstand it and misinterpret it to mean ... that because you are saved by grace alone it does not matter at all what you do; you can go on sinning as much as you like because it will redound all the more to the glory of grace. That is a very good test of gospel preaching. If my preaching and presentation of the gospel of salvation does not expose it to that misunderstanding, then it is not the gospel. Let me show you what I mean.

If a man preaches justification by works, no one would ever raise this question. If a man's preaching is, ‘If you want to be Christians, and if you want to go to heaven, you must stop committing sins, you must take up good works, and if you do so regularly and constantly, and do not fail to keep on at it, you will make yourselves Christians, you will reconcile yourselves to God and you will go to heaven’. Obviously a man who preaches in that strain would never be liable to this misunderstanding. Nobody would say to such a man, ‘Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?’, because the man's whole emphasis is just this, that if you go on sinning you are certain to be damned, and only if you stop sinning can you save yourselves. So that misunderstanding could never arise. And you can apply the same test to any other type or kind of preaching. If a man preaches that you are saved by the Church, or by sacraments, and so on, this kind of argument does not arise. This particular misunderstanding can only arise when the doctrine of justification by faith only is presented.

There is a sense in which the doctrine of justification by faith only is a very dangerous doctrine; dangerous, I mean, in the sense that it can be misunderstood. It exposes a man to this particular charge. People listening to it may say, 'Ah, there is a man who does not encourage us to live a good life, he seems to say that there is no value in our works, he says that 'all our righteousness are as filthy rags.' Therefore what he is saying is, that it does not matter what you do, sin as much as you like.' There is thus clearly a sense in which the message of 'justification by faith only' can be dangerous, and likewise with the message that salvation is entirely of grace. I say therefore that if our preaching does not expose us to that charge and to that misunderstanding, it is because we are not really preaching the gospel...

It is the charge that formal dead Christianity- if there is such a thing- has always brought against this startling, staggering message, that God 'justifies the ungodly', and that we are saved, not by anything that we do, but in spite of it, entirely and only by the grace of God through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

That is my comment and it is a very important comment for preachers. I would say to all preachers: If your preaching of salvation has not been misunderstood in that way, then you had better examine your sermons again, and you had better make sure that you are really preaching the salvation that is offered in the New Testament to the ungodly, the sinner, to those who are dead in trespasses and sins, to those who are enemies of God. There is this kind of dangerous element about the true presentation of the doctrine of salvation," (*Romans 6*, pp. 8-10).

The criticism of license leveled against Paul by his opponents (i.e., Justification by faith in Christ alone encourages men to continue in sin) was a gross misunderstanding of the gospel. And so having explained the truth of the gospel in vv. 15-16, Paul now sets out to defend it and refute the false charge of license/antinomianism.

In response to his critics, Paul offers 4 arguments in vv. 17-21 to show why a Christian who is justified is not given a license to sin but rather is motivated to live a life of grateful obedience unto God. He reveals how the gospel produces an earnest desire to obey rather than disobey God.

LESSON:

C. PAUL'S DEFENSE, vv. 17-21

1. CHRIST DOES NOT PROMOTE SIN, LEGALISM DOES. vv. 17-18

To understand Paul's first argument you need to understand the word, "sinners" in v. 17. When we studied v. 15, we learned that Paul used this same word to denote the Jewish attitude toward Gentiles.

Jews considered Gentiles “sinners” not because they were immoral (in the way we typically think about this word) but because they did not have or live by the Mosaic Law (e.g., follow dietary laws, receive circumcision, observe Jewish feast days, etc...).

Before coming to faith in Christ, both Paul and Peter lived in strict accordance to the law. Paul lived as a strict Pharisee, seeking to gain God’s acceptance by keeping a multitude of laws (cf. Philip. 3:4-6).

But, having been justified by faith in Christ apart from keeping rules and regulations, Paul and Peter had also come to be viewed as “sinners” in the eyes of their fellow Jews. For example, when Peter first arrived in Antioch he lived by the truth of the gospel. He disregarded the dietary laws and ate “unholy food.” He enjoyed unrestricted table fellowship with uncircumcised Gentiles and did not insist that they be circumcised.

Whereas Paul and Peter had once been law-abiding Jews, when they began trusting in Christ for their justification, they gave up law-keeping as the way to be justified. Consequently, the Judaizers wrongly concluded that justification by faith causes people to disregard the law and to sin all in the name of Christ.

However, in Paul’s mind, the very thought that Christ would be the author and instigator of sin was blasphemous. And so with fiery hot indignation, Paul responds to this false charge at the end of v. 17, “By no means! Certainly not! A thousand times NO to anyone who suggests that Christ promotes sin!”

Christ and His grace can never be blamed for man’s sin and guilt. The Scriptures repeatedly teach the sinlessness of Christ (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:22; 1 Jn. 3:5). Habbakuk 1:13 says that God’s, “... eyes are too pure to approve evil, and ... can not look on wickedness with favor.” James 1:13 says, “...God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.”

Christ died to make us holy not unholy, as Paul writes in Colossians 1:22, “He has now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before Him...” The very purpose for Christ coming was to take away sin not promote it, “You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin,” (1 Jn. 3:5).

The question we must ask then is, “If Christ doesn’t promote sin, who does?”

The answer is the legalist (v. 18)!

What is Paul saying?

Just as the word “sinner” in v. 17 provided the clue to understanding v. 17, so the word, “transgressor” provides the clue to understanding v. 18.

Paul is saying that the one who is outside of the law and thus fails to follow the rules (e.g., Gentiles who don't abstain from certain foods, are not circumcised, etc...) is not the real "sinner" (v. 17).

Rather, the real "transgressor" (i.e., true violator of the law) is the one who seeks to live under the law's demands of perfection!

Keep in mind the context. Paul is confronting Peter's hypocrisy and seeking to clarify the gospel. Paul is using this moment of failure in Peter's life to help the Galatians, who like Peter, were being tempted to do exactly what Peter had done.

When Peter first arrived in Antioch, he freely ate with Gentiles. However, when the "circumcision party" arrived, out of fear, he caved into their demands and withdrew (2:12). His withdrawal gave the impression that those who eat foods forbidden by the law sin, whereas those who abstain are righteous. This is why Peter's withdrawal from the Gentiles was so grievous.

Paul tells Peter that he was in effect rebuilding what he had torn down. Peter had initially preached that the Gentiles were saved by faith not works. But by his withdrawing from them, his behavior gave the impression that justification comes by works of the law plus faith in Christ. Like Peter, the Galatians were being tempted by the Judaizers to rebuild the law in place of the gospel of grace. If the Galatians did so, they would be the true transgressors.

Note carefully: Even though we start the Christian life by grace we are continually tempted to think we must finish it by works. We are constantly tempted to rebuild what we have torn down, as Paul writes, in Galatians 3:3, "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?"

Paul tells Peter (and the Galatians) that those who introduce law-keeping as the way to earn God's favor, give proof that they, not Christ, are the true sinners (transgressor/law-breakers).

How does legalism promote sin?

The ironic truth is that the more one seeks to live by the law ("rebuild"), the more sinful they become (cf. Rom. 7:5, 8)!

The law does not heal our sinful condition it actually stirs up sinful desires and behavior. Setting the law in opposition to our flesh is like setting fire in opposition to gasoline. Because man's fallen heart is sinful, the law stirs up sin and sin rages all the more. Therefore, everyone one who seeks to live by works of the law breaks the law (is a transgressor).

The reason legalism leads to law-breaking is because no one can keep the Law in its perfection (Matt. 5:48) by following laws. The true purpose of the law is to reveal sin

(Rom. 3:20). Living by the law is like looking into a mirror 24/7/365 and only noticing all the blemishes one has. Consequently, if all a man beholds is sin, that is what he will become. For we become what we behold (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18).

The law was never given by God to give life (Gal. 3:21). The law merely reveals sin and condemns it. The law gives no strength to oppose sin. The law cannot dethrone sin nor break the power of sin. The law is holy but cannot make a man holy. The law is just but cannot justify a man. The law is good but cannot make a man good.

The law simply declares the whole duty of man and then judges and condemns him for not fulfilling it. The law contains no grace and no power to move a man's heart to obey God and pursue holiness.

So, Paul says in v. 18, that legalism, not justification by grace through faith in Christ, is the servant of sin (breeds and encourages sin, cf., Gal. 5:13ff).

CONCLUSION:

As we think about Paul's defense of the gospel, we are reminded of two things.

1. PEOPLE INEVITABLY FALL INTO ONE OF TWO EXTREMES: LEGALISM OR LICENSE.

Legalism operates on the principle, "God accepts me because of what I do."

Legalism substitutes Christ's works and perfect righteousness with one's own works and self-righteousness.

Legalistic believers and churches tend to be overly restrictive and oppressive. A legalist has a performance-based approach to the Christian life. Christianity is reduced to a list of rules.

For a legalist, a justified believer (i.e., has God's favor) is someone who does certain things and abstains from doing certain things. If another doesn't live by the legalist's standards, he or she is a "sinner." For a legalist, God's favor is gained by leading a good life and is lost by failing to live by the rules.

Whenever someone thinks of the Christian life primarily as a list of "dos" and "don'ts," he or she is under the influence of legalism.

License operates on the principle, "God doesn't care what I do."

It is falsely reasoned, "Because grace and forgiveness are free, it doesn't matter how I live; I don't have to obey the law."

Churches and believers like this tend to be overly permissive and hands off. Lawless people abuse Christian liberty by treating it as a license to sin (cf. Gal. 5:13).

The grace of God is used to justify one's bad behavior or excuse one's lack of obedience.

So, whenever a person thinks:

It is okay to sin, because God will forgive;

The law of God is useless or hurtful as rule for living;

Pursuing holiness is unnecessary, legalistic or not important, this person is under the influence of license.

As we will come to see in vv. 19-21, all who have come to faith in Christ, partake of two blessings:

1. Forgiveness of the penalty of sin
2. A new heart through the work of the Holy Spirit; You become a new creation.

This new life creates new desires for the pursuit of holiness and obedience. Without these new desires present (even in the smallest way, cf. Isa. 42:3) there is

- no evidence of justification or freedom from the law (James 2:17)
- no adorning of the gospel (Titus 2:10)
- no edification of men (Rom. 15:2; Eph. 4:29)
- and no evidence of truly loving and glorifying God (Matt. 5:16; Jn. 14:15).

The second truth we are reminded of by Paul's defense is:

2. IT IS NOT ENOUGH FOR GOSPEL-DRIVEN ADVOCATES TO DEFEND AGAINST LEGALISM. WE MUST ALSO DEFEND AGAINST LICENSE.

Paul clearly teaches that both legalism and license are serious distortions of the gospel. The Gospel is the answer to both dangers.

On the one hand, God does not love us because we obey Him. On the other hand, justification by grace through faith alone doesn't make obedience optional. God's grace doesn't relieve us of our duties to obey but rather empowers us to obey (Titus 2:11-14)!

The grace of God frees us from striving to gain God's favor through our obedience. And, His grace drives us to obey because we have come to understand that we have God's favor! The gospel, therefore, teaches us that we do not obey for life but rather from life.

Legalists and lawless sinners both need the gospel. The gospel frees the legalist from performance and the lawless from rebellion.

The gospel not only forgives the penalty of sin thereby freeing the believer from all performance, but also breaks the power of sin thereby freeing the believer to obey.

The truth of the gospel- justification by grace through faith alone- floods our lives with God's love and the result is that our hearts respond with thankful and joyful obedience to God's law. And so like the Psalmist we cry out,

¹² Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes! ¹³ With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth. ¹⁴ In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. ¹⁵ I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. ¹⁶ I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word... ²⁴ Your testimonies are my delight; they are my counselors. ³⁴ Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. ³⁵ Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it, (Ps. 119:12-16, 24, 34-35).

© John Fonville

Permissions: Permission is happily granted to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not revise the wording in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. For web posting, a link to this document on Paramount's website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by John Fonville.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By John Fonville. © Paramount Church Website: www.paramountchurch.net