

New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 9 – Galatians

Paul's letter to the Galatian churches has been called 'the gospel of liberty', and rightly so. It is about liberty from the bondage of the law (that is, from trying to save oneself by means of the law, which it was never intended to do), see Romans 3:19,20; liberty from the condemnation of the law, see Rom. 6:14; and liberty to keep the law, (that is, these ten commandments of the moral law) out of gratitude to God and in ways that are pleasing to Him, see James 1:25. It was in reading this letter that Martin Luther's mind and heart were opened to understand and embrace the biblical teaching of justification by faith alone, and out of that came the Protestant Reformation.

It may be difficult for us to imagine today that any Christian should have to observe the Jewish ceremonial laws in order to achieve one's spiritual status before God and to maintain His approval, but that was often what was taught in the early New Testament Church and there were many Gentile believers who were under pressure to adopt a Jewish way of life. This was the teaching of the Judaizers who had infiltrated many of the churches and tried to influence believers with their 'faith plus works' theology. Their influence was particularly felt among the churches of Galatia.

These legalists appeared to have much to support this teaching. Paul himself continued to keep the Jewish feasts, to undertake Jewish vows, and even to cherish his Jewish background and training. Paul understood, however, that, when the substance (Christ) had come, the shadow could disappear. He realized that even in Old Testament times people were saved by grace through faith in the coming Christ, not by anything they had done or might contribute to their own salvation. This is what he consistently taught and, in doing so, fervently denied that Gentiles would have to adopt a Jewish way of life in order to become Christians.

A church council was called to meet in Jerusalem in 50 A.D., and there it was determined that the burden of ceremonial law should not be imposed on Gentile Christians. Paul was very adamant about this, and the letter now before us is the clearest, strongest statement he has given us on that subject.

This letter to the Galatians is in three parts. The first part, chapters 1 and 2, consists of Paul's defence of his apostolic authority, and he begins by stating that his call to be an apostle came not from men, as the Judaizers insisted it did, but from Christ Himself. The apostle is surprised that the Christians in these churches are so soon turned away by these Judaizers to another gospel, to a heresy which is no gospel at all, and he calls for a curse on such teachers who seek to pervert the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ. As these false teachers wanted to distance themselves from Paul, so it is clear that he wished to distance himself also (and everyone under his care) from all that they were about.

Not only his calling to be an apostle, he writes, but also the very message he preaches is from Christ. Paul had once persecuted Christians and done everything he could to stamp out the church, but when he was converted he did not confer with others who were apostles before him to learn what he should say and he sought no endorsement from them. He was unknown to the Judean churches at that time, in fact – their familiarity with him was only by reputation – and what they heard was that he now preached the true gospel which he once sought to destroy.

Paul did finally travel to Jerusalem some fourteen years later. He arrived there with Titus, a Greek, who was not compelled by any of the other apostles to be circumcised. It was acknowledged by all that just as Peter had been called to preach to Jews, so also Paul had been called to take this same message to Gentiles. The apostles, collectively, even gave Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship as a sign of their approval for just such a ministry.

It was not Paul, but Peter and some other Jews (including Barnabas), who were to be blamed for showing hypocritical favour to Jews over Gentiles as they ate together in Antioch, and it was Paul, having noticed this, who rebuked Peter openly for doing so. The point is that Peter may have been seen as a leader among the apostles, but it was Paul who sought to be more consistent in living out the doctrine which they all preached. If, after all, Christ has broken down the middle wall of division between Jew and Gentile, and has made of the two one new man in Himself having reconciled both unto God by way of the cross, it is not right that anyone favour Jews over Gentiles as if they deserve greater preference

and might expect better treatment before God. One for whom Christ's blood has been spilled, after all, does not need Abraham's blood flowing through his veins to reap that benefit.

In the second part of this letter, chapters 3 and 4, Paul explains and defends the doctrine of justification by faith. The purpose of this is to establish that circumcision and legal obedience play no part in securing salvation for anyone. If Abraham received a righteousness by faith before he was circumcised, and before the moral law was given, other Jews and even Gentiles, too, could and would be justified in the same way, not by works but by faith alone.

The law cannot save, for one would have to be born without sin and keep the law perfectly all his life in order to avoid the curse of the law, and no one born of Adam is without sin or capable of keeping the law so flawlessly to achieve that. It is precisely because man cannot save himself from the curse of the law by his own effort – indeed, everything he tries to do only adds to the curse – that Christ came into the world and achieved a perfect righteousness (thus fulfilling the covenant of works in which the first Adam failed), offered Himself up on the cross and so bore that curse in the place of others (thus fulfilling the demands of the covenant of grace, the Just dying for the unjust) that sinners through faith in Christ might have life. It is in this way, and only in this way, that the promise to Abraham – a promise of eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ – can be given to both Jews and Gentiles alike.

For those who might argue that the law was later given to replace faith as a means or contributory cause of salvation, Paul points out that the covenant promise was to Abraham and his Seed, namely, Christ. This has ruled out any possibility that the purpose of the law was ever to save anybody. The law reveals sin, rather, and shows the need to trust in Christ and be saved. As children may be under tutors, so unbelievers in the Old Testament were under law to lead them to Christ. But, coming to faith in Him, believers became heirs and no longer needed a tutor.

The apostle goes on to elaborate further this child-tutor analogy. Though he be an heir, an Old Testament believer still lived without the freedom which was his in principle until the time appointed of the Father. Right here we see the difference between Old Testament and New Testament believers, because when that time

arrived God sent forth His Son who redeemed His people from the curse of the law that they might receive the adoption of sons, plus all the liberty which comes with that, and receive, too, the Holy Spirit who helps them to pray. So delivered, God's people are no longer regarded as under-age wards, but are now treated as full-grown sons.

If one subjects himself to any kind of legalism, including that which the Judaizers insisted on, it is no different from the bondage of any salvation by works offered by every pagan religion. There is no advantage in trading one slave master for another. Paul wanted the Galatian Christians to renew their former attitude of love toward him and to appreciate that it was the Judaizers, false teachers the lot of them, who were their real enemies.

In the final part of the letter, chapters 5 and 6, we see what a life of faith looks like, that such a Spirit-filled life produces fruit, God working in us to will and to do His good pleasure. Here we move from the legal to the practical side of the Christian life. If we are in Christ, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love. We are saved by faith *apart* from works, in other words, but not by faith *without* works. Good works are the confirming evidence of saving faith.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. So, if we have the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit and submit ourselves to His leading in our life. Having the Holy Spirit does not mean living independently of one another or having to bear our burdens alone, but is expressed by being there for one another and humbly serving each other in any particular need. Let us not grow weary in well-doing or lose heart, but let us do good to all, especially to others in the household of faith.

Even the Judaizers did not keep the law of God themselves, but only boasted of their influence on others and took all credit for winning them over to their cause. Paul makes it a point of not boasting at all except in the cross of Christ, for what we all need, and only Christ Jesus provides, is to be made a new creation in Him.

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