

Galatians 5:2-6 “Are You a Legalist?”

GAL 5:2-6 “Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”

This section of Paul’s letter is reminiscent of the way he started this epistle where he warned the Galatians that what they were entertaining, in altering the gospel with the law, was a message that kills.

GAL 1:9 “As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!”

This section, as we saw last week in verse one, started with the message that it was for freedom that Christ set us free, and now Paul shows the stark contrast to this message as he points out that to add anything to Christ’s redemptive work is nothing short of denying the grace of God and to fall from that grace.

And we’ll look at what all of this means for Christians today as Paul now expounds on what he says at the end of verse one, “do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”

Of course the yoke of slavery he refers to here is the law and specifically circumcision as a means of attaining righteousness before God. And, as if to speak prophetically, he announces what will happen to anyone who goes down this path.

GAL 5:2-3 “Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.”

Paul starts with an exclamation. The NIV uses the phrase, mark my words, but the literal translation is simply, behold. It’s essentially the same word Jesus uses in the book of Revelation when He says,

“I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.” (REV 1:18)

It is a word which expresses the result of some truth. In the case of Christ being resurrected from the dead it expresses that the grave could not and did not hold Him and He now is living as the Lord and King He is.

In a similar way Paul is saying behold what happens to those who trust in anything but Christ alone for your salvation. And yet, in the next breath Paul appeals to them, not as an authoritarian apostle, but as a man who knows them and loves them as a friend; “I, Paul, tell you...”

“This is Paul speaking to you -- Paul whom you know, Paul your friend and father in Christ...” (F.F. Bruce)

And yet, though he appeals to them as a friend, his message is one which is from the Father and therefore it is a message which comes from the highest authority and with the greatest concern; “...if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.”

Now, this is interesting in light of the fact that Paul is recognizing that apparently they have not made the decision to become circumcised at the writing of this letter. Notice he says IF you let yourselves be circumcised. They had not yet done so, they are only contemplating this.

But if they actually go through with this circumcision he goes on to say that Christ will be of no value to them. The NASB uses the expression, “Christ will be of no benefit to you.”

The actual Greek word means not able to assist, to be useful or advantageous, to profit. This is why the KJV uses the word profit, as if to say, the return on your investment produces nothing. If your investment is to try and earn your own righteousness through the law then Christ has been taken out of the picture and you’re left with a net gain of zero as it relates to your salvation.

And Paul then further explains what he means when he says, “Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.” (GAL 5:3)

Here’s what Paul essentially means. And keep in mind that he was previously talking about two covenants described as the two

women in Abraham's life: Hagar the slave woman, and Sarah, the free woman.

What he is describing is two systems: one system which involves the law which leads to slavery and death, and the other system which involves the Messiah who fulfilled the law and everything the law pointed to. One system was a shadow of Christ, whereas the other system was Christ Himself who is life and our freedom from slavery.

What was apparently taking place in the thinking of the Galatians and the Judaizers was that you could and should combine the two systems. It's like, if one dose of heart medicine is good imagine how good it would be if I doubled up on it.

If Christ came to fulfill the law and He is our Savior, then imagine how holy and righteous we would be if we not only accepted Christ as our Lord but also added the law He Himself obeyed perfectly.

Paul says, you can't combine the two systems. They are exclusive to their original intent as given by God. You either move in one system or the other. But you will reap the rewards of whatever system you choose and those things associated with that system or covenant.

Evidently, the Galatians did not understand that theologically they were divided on what it means to be saved. Some of them had been convinced by the Judaizers that maybe we can and should mix the two covenants. But they can't be mixed. Each plays a role in the life of mankind, but those roles cannot be substituted for the other.

It's like saying we can take water which is designed for the cooling system of your car and switch it with the oil designed for the crankcase. The thinking is they are both used in the same car, why not mix them? And we'll put the oil in the radiator. Or better yet, we'll put water and oil together in both systems.

It's a false logic. Simply because they may work in close proximity together doesn't mean they'll work together. And yes, the law did work in close proximity to the Messiah who came to fulfill the law. But it is a false logic to think that one can be interchanged for the other or work together. It's an all or none proposition.

And so Paul says that if you are going to use part of the law in your salvation experience then you need to know that you are obligated to keep it all. Why? Because it's either one system or the other.

GAL 5:3 "Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law."

Circumcision was only part of the law. But if these Galatians were going to use circumcision then they were obligated to also adhere to the dietary laws, to the keeping of certain holy days, to making sure they kept themselves from ceremonially unclean things, and yes even the 10 commandments as a means of salvation or even sanctification.

In other words, they were obliged to obey the whole system delivered to Moses. They could not pick and choose. And by the way, this is a danger which the modern day church faces. For example, someone recently asked the question during our Thursday night bible study on Exodus, as to whether or not Messianic Jewish fellowships are legalistic in their approach to salvation.

And the answer is yes and no. For some Messianic Jews it is a very closed community when it comes to belonging to their fellowship. Though it may not be written in stone, it is troublingly inferred that in some of these fellowships you must adhere to all of the Jewish holidays and their ceremonies to be a part of that church.

Other restrictions are also applied. One web site entitled, "Congregation Shema Yisrael" tries to show the distinctions between a Messianic Synagogue and a traditional Western Church. And here's what they write:

"Messianic Jewish congregations follow an annual cycle of events referred to in the Scriptures as the appointed festivals of the Lord" (Leviticus 23). These include Friday night and/or Saturday worship services, Rosh Chodesh (New Moon) assemblies, Passover seders, as well as the celebrations of Matzot (Unleavened Breads), Yom Kippur (Atonement)".

And they then name another six of these holy days along with additional traditional commemorations.

Now, there is nothing wrong with commemorating these days, but what is disturbing is that those Jewish believers in these congregations, though they may voluntarily observe these days as

being uniquely Jewish, would in practice be seen as less than Jewish if they didn't observe them in that congregation.

In other words, if a Jew, who came to Christ and wanted to fellowship in one of these Jewish congregations, decided not to participate in these holy days he would be viewed as one who was not taking advantage of his full heritage as a Jewish believer.

Therefore, he would be viewed as a believer who was not taking advantage of the law as a means to his ability to grow as a Jewish believer.

What all of this does is to construct barriers between what it means to be a Jewish believer and what it means to be a Gentile believer. And what do the Scriptures teach in this very letter to the Galatians?

GAL 3:26-29 "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

Some of these Messianic congregations would argue that what Paul is teaching here is that, as it relates to how we are saved through faith alone in Christ, we would agree that there is no one group who takes precedence and that all groups are part of the family of Christ who have placed their faith in Him for salvation.

They would further argue that like the Baptists or the Presbyterians and so forth we are meeting a need for a specific group of people who have a like heritage and background and who want to pursue that in peace.

My response to that is that, in so far as the Baptists or the Presbyterians or the Messianic Jewish congregations adhere to the word of God and the finished work of Christ without demanding their congregation to adhere to those portions which have been fulfilled in Christ or adding extra-biblical rules and regulations, then sure you can gravitate to any group you feel is teaching the word of God and you feel comfortable with.

But when the Baptists or the Presbyterians or any other group are going to force me to follow their rules which the Scriptures don't

force me to follow then they have gone beyond what it means to be a Christian and have now moved towards a legalistic approach to their salvation.

To force someone to wear only the types of clothes you deem appropriate, or to force women to wear or not wear makeup, or to force a believer to adhere to certain holy days, even those holy days Israel was commanded by God to observe before Christ came, in my estimation, is to add to the finished work of Christ.

Going back to this Messianic Jewish web site they say this about diet: “Messianic Jewish congregations encourage the eating of biblically kosher foods.”

That’s fine if you as an individual want to eat kosher foods. But what happens to a Jewish believer in this congregation who chooses not to, and who may even show up at a congregational dinner with pork chops?

Are they seen as something less than holy? If this is a practice which is not simply encouraged, as they say, but is actually forced upon people in that congregation through peer pressure, then yes they are seen as someone less than holy.

What if a non-Jewish believer, who wants to be a part of this congregation, decides they don’t want to adhere to these practices? Are they ostracized? Can they become leaders in this congregation? Or is that reserved only for other Jews who adhere to such practices?

Circumcision is another issue brought up on this web site. And please don’t misunderstand me here. I’m not condemning a church that wants to be distinct in its biblical approach to salvation and sanctification. But I will not condone any church as being biblical which makes demands on God’s people which the whole counsel of God’s word doesn’t make.

Let me quote from this web site on circumcision. “Messianic Jewish congregations promote the biblical practice of brit milah (covenant circumcision) for Jewish children.”

What does that mean? Does this mean for example that if a Jewish child is not circumcised that the parents are biblically negligent in raising their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord?

Does this mean that Gentile children in that same congregation are not encouraged to practice covenant circumcision? And by the

way, when they say covenant circumcision they are not simply talking about the removal of the foreskin from the child. They mean circumcision as it was practiced in the Old Testament where to neglect this practice was tantamount to rejecting God and His covenant promises given to Abraham.

One more example; this one dealing with marriage.

“Messianic Jewish congregations provide an environment for single people to meet one another and find prospective marriage partners.”

That certainly seems appropriate. But let me continue to quote.

“They offer marriage counseling that deals with the various aspects of the biblical covenant, and of maintaining a biblical Jewish household.”

There aren't many ways you can slice this and not come up with the fact that what they mean by this is that, outside of a Gentile becoming a covenantal Jew, they are encouraging young Jewish women and men to only marry within the Jewish covenantal context, in other words only other Jews.

Anywhere else this would be called bigotry. Can you imagine if we promoted only whites marrying whites in this congregation? What about black or Hispanic congregations? What if they had a stated policy whereby any Christian who was not black or Hispanic would be discouraged from marrying anyone outside of their race?

The reason I bring all of this up is because what Paul is dealing with is not some phenomenon which was restricted to the Jewish world of the first century. This is a problem which Christians have been contending with from the beginning.

This problem has to do with any Christian from any background taking the word of God and twisting it in such a way as to add extra things to the work of Jesus Christ who came, not to put extra restraints on us, but to set us free.

Whenever the grace of God and Christ alone is not sufficient for our salvation, which includes our sanctification, then Jesus Christ becomes deficient; He's not enough. But Peter makes it clear that it is not Christ plus the law, but Christ and His promises which allow us to grow in Him.

2PE 1:3-4 “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by

his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”

This idea that some legalistic approach to Christ is more desirable is simply ludicrous. It's the same attitude the religious group the Seventh Day Adventist Church subscribe to. They too, promote the keeping of the dietary laws of the Old Testament. If you are going to be a leader in their church this is what you must adhere to.

Again, Paul would ask them, if you're going to keep part of the law you're simply missing the point. You then must keep it all. You can't pick and choose those portions of the law you like and throw out the rest. If you are going to accept Christ as Lord and Savior then you have no business going back and forcing people to keep any portion of the Mosaic Law.

Now you might say, well those are fringe beliefs, and you might be right except you don't need to be a part of the fringe to fall into this trap of trying to keep the law to please God. What about the ten commandments?

Surely no Christian would argue that the ten commandments must be kept. Paul would disagree. He would say that if you're going to use the ten commandments to please God or to earn some form of righteousness then you have placed yourself back in the system of the law and you must not keep just the ten commandments in that case, but every other commandment given by God in the Old Testament.

This doesn't discount the ten commandments for the believer, but instead of going down a list of do's and don'ts the Christian has a new law written on his heart and it is a law of love. And if you're loving God with all your heart, soul and mind and your neighbor as yourself, you've fulfilled the law.

But you've fulfilled the law in Christ and therefore you are not operating in the Old Covenant system but the New Covenant in the blood of Christ who purchased us because He, and only He, was able to keep the Old Covenant law perfectly.

And since He did keep it perfectly He is able to impute His righteousness to our account as though we kept the law perfectly even though we didn't.

Paul is saying to the Galatians, if Christ kept the law for you and abolished the law which was your taskmaster, why then are going back to dig up the old system? And Paul would say the same to us today.

How many churches have put religious laws in their congregations which go beyond the written word of God for New Testament believers? As I've stated before there are all sorts of religious laws which place us back in bondage instead of allowing us to live in the freedom Christ purchased for us.

Now, don't mistake this freedom I speak of with an excuse to sin. That's not what the Scriptures teach. They teach that if we love Christ we will obey Him. But that obedience is first and foremost obeying the command to repent and believe that He is the Messiah.

But it also involves a love for Him which is manifest in a life of submission and a life which no longer is restricted to pleasing only self. Our obedience however, is not something which is forced upon us by a set of rules, but by an understanding of how short we fall of the rules, which is why Christ came to take our debt, and then out of gratitude and love for Christ we say yes to Him and no to our flesh.

GAL 5:4 "You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace."

Whoa! What is this falling away from grace stuff? Well, this is very serious. But keep the context in mind. Paul is specifically speaking of those who are trying to be justified by law.

Well, who would this include? It would certainly include the Judaizers and it would include those Galatians who have decided to throw Christ off to the side in favor of the law. Who would do such a thing? Could a born again Christian filled with the Spirit of God deny Christ in this way?

The answer is no. A born again Christian may be fooled into believing bad doctrine, he may be deceived into adhering to a set of rules which are extra-biblical and he may even worship God in his own mind according to the Old Testament law; but substitute Christ for the law? No.

The Spirit bears witness with his spirit that he is a child of God and that only because of him placing his faith in Christ as Lord and Savior. What Paul is addressing here is the stark contrast he's been dealing with all along. The law versus grace.

And he is sending a message to the unbelievers in Galatia who are a part of this church along with the believers who are entertaining this notion of adding the law, that the law will kill you if you seek it as your Savior.

Paul is hoping to shock the believers in Galatia back into reality. This is why he started this letter the way he did. He doesn't believe these people would voluntarily abandon the grace they've received. Remember?

GAL 3:1-3 "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?"

But for the Judaizers this is a message which is designed to put them in their place. It is designed to force them to repent of their legalistic way to salvation and sanctification, and embrace the one who came to set them free, not keep them in the bondage of the law.

And the message is the same for the church today. If the church begins to slip back into a rules and regulations approach to Christ then we must understand that by its very nature it is an abandonment of grace. We alienate ourselves from Christ.

This is similar to what Jesus told the Ephesian church in the book of Revelation when He said, 'you have left your first love.'

That doesn't mean that we reject Christ necessarily, but it doesn't help us to grow in Christ if we're seeking ways which are contrary to Him.

Let's put it this way. If we choose to sin against the Lord are we seeking the Lord or are we alienating ourselves from the Lord at that moment? Now imagine how wrong it would be if we devise a system of unbelief to be joined to a system of belief. You can't believe and not believe at the same time. One will give way to the other.

Paul is saying to the Galatians that in practice unbelief has given way to belief and we cannot please Christ in unbelief. And in that way they have fallen from grace. Not that they have been denied

grace or that grace cannot break through, but through their unbelief they hold grace at arms length.

And when they do that they dishonor the One who came to make grace a reality in their lives. Realizing that he is probably breaking through Paul then adds the next phrase.

GAL 5:5 “But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope.”

Notice the pronoun Paul uses; we. It’s inclusive. He’s saying that the righteousness he longs for in Christ is the same righteousness many of these people in Galatia look to as well, even if they’ve been sidetracked by all of this talk of circumcision and the law.

He knows that the Holy Spirit will do the work in the lives of these people as they look to the truth which Paul is sharing. And this by the way, is one very important reason we always continue to give the truth in love. God can change the heart of a person, but it’s always in the context of His truth.

GAL 5:6 “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”

It’s not about circumcision or any other part of the law. We don’t please God in this way. The way we please Him is through faith expressed through love. You want to be considered a faithful Christian, then love the Lord above all and your neighbor as yourself.

1JO 4:7-11 “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”