

Legalism or Liberty? | Galatians 4:21-5:1

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.

For it is written, "Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband."

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman." So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

INTRODUCTION

For the last several months, we have had something called Teaching Lab – a monthly workshop for a few of our leaders who serve in some sort of teaching capacity in our church and one of our first lessons was called "Walk The Line." And Walk The Line pertained to the interpretation of scripture – every part of the Bible has a line whether small and thin or large and obvious. Our job as Bible teachers is to walk the line and not go above or beneath. When we go below the line, we are saying things that aren't in the text and we can run into problems where we presume God's grace, misinterpret a text by isolating a verse and ignoring the context, and so on. When we go above the line, we add to the text and similarly, we run into trouble because we ignore God's grace and promote legalism.

Legalism is taking something that God has spoken in Scripture and adding to it. In order to better understand what I'm talking about when I speak of legalism, I think it's important that we define it – it has been defined several ways over the years, but I think one of the most helpful definitions is that from Sam Storms when he writes:

- a. "Legalism is the tendency to regard as divine law things that God has neither required nor forbidden in Scripture, and the corresponding inclination to look with suspicion on others for their failure or refusal to conform." (Sam Storms)

In short, legalism destroys godliness because it boasts of self-righteousness. It is something that we ought to pay close attention to – many of you come from a legalistic background, but none of us are immune to legalism or legalistic tendencies. Whether we have the humility to address them and repent is another question.

In this morning's text, the Apostle Paul addresses the Galatians and the legalism that they're embracing through the false teaching of the Judaizers. Over the course of the last few weeks, the Apostle Paul introduced, argued for, and has been teaching on justification by faith alone – that is, that one is only counted as righteousness before God through faith in Christ Jesus alone.

One of the reasons that this has been such a massive emphasis was because the Galatians were turning away from the true gospel and turning toward legalism. The irony in all of this is that they thought it was bringing them closer to God – making them more holy and acceptable. Have you ever felt this way? Where you desire to be more holy, more acceptable, more worthy or righteous – so, rather than turning to Jesus and who He says you are, you turn toward doing more in order to count up your righteousness? In many ways, that's called legalism.

The irony about legalism is that it enslaves people – it can only promote self-righteousness, however when we turn to Christ, there is gospel freedom because of His righteousness – where if we want to boast in anything, we boast in Christ. This is what is at the heart of our text this morning. Let's pray.

PASTORAL PRAYER

The Weight of Legalism (v. 21)

To be fair, this text can sound a little confusing and it can be a little challenging, but we're going to get through this together! We're going to need to slow it down a little bit. Therefore, we're going to unpack this text into three sections to better help us – we're going to consider the weight of legalism, the contrast between legalism and liberty, and the solution to legalism.

Additionally, have your hand and pencils ready because I'm going to reference a good portion of Genesis in this text in order to provide further context. And lastly, in this section, Paul is speaking directly to the Galatians and in turn, the Spirit of God is speaking to us – he's not being broad, but speaking directly to them so may God use this text to reveal our hearts.

Let's begin with "the weight of legalism" (v. 21):

* Paul's concern with the Galatians since the start of this epistle has been their turning away from the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel (1:6) and in chapter four, he's begun to become a little more practical in their efforts. At the start of the chapter four, which Nathanael preached, Paul reminds them that they are sons of God because of Jesus' work for

them, then Pastor Jeff from Harlingen walked you through the Galatians' temptation to want to pursue performance over grace. Well now, Paul who is a great debater challenges their desires with the old testament since they claim that's their jam writing:

- a. "Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?"
 - i. The word "law" refers not only to the Mosaic law, but specifically the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy; and within these books);
 - ii. Paul is asking the Galatians – "since you claim to be under the law, since you love the law, do you know the purpose of the law?"
 1. Two of the purposes of the law was to expose the depravity of our hearts and point us to our need for a savior;
 2. However, the Galatians are thinking that being under the law is what makes them holy; righteous; acceptable;
 3. Paul is ultimately challenging their theology; the law is becoming their idol; Christ is not at the center –
 4. We've talked a lot about idols – but let us consider "good" idols for a moment.
 - a. Devotionals
 - b. Sermons
 - c. Christian TV/Radio
 - d. Books
 5. Is Jesus really at the center of your life? Or is it something else?
- b. Desire
 - i. A desire to be under the law produces legalism;
 - ii. A desire to be under the law produces ungodliness;
 1. "The law is known from nature, the gospel only from special revelation; the law demands perfect righteousness, but the gospel grants it; the law leads people to eternal life by works, and the gospel produces good works from the riches of the eternal life granted in faith; the law presently condemns people, and the gospel acquits them." (Herman Bavnick)
 - iii. The law is a great irony – while it is good in teaching us how to live, it reveals that we actually can't uphold it, but Jesus does! And in Jesus there is now freedom – that our righteousness is not our own, but Christ's'.
 - iv. The weight of the law is so heavy and you are simply not strong enough to carry it –

TRANSITION: the weight of the law ought to reveal our hearts and expose our idols – the reality of the law ought to reveal our need for Jesus.

The Contrast Between Legalism and Liberty (v. 22-27)

Here's where all of our references are going to come out. In order to emphasize or make his case further, Paul is going to use the illustration of Sarah and Hagar. And in this section, Paul uses this illustration in order to demonstrate a contrast between grace and law, free and slave, the flesh and the spirit, and legalism and liberty.

Paul begins by writing, "for it is written" – and I love this because Paul goes back to the beginning with them. This shows the depth of knowledge and wisdom he has of God's word – we must be in God's word!

Paul opens with a historical account of Abraham from Genesis – let's look at this in three short parts:

- a. The Historical Account of Abraham from Genesis (v. 22-23)
 - i. Abraham's two sons: Ishmael and Isaac
 1. Genesis 11-12
 - a. Abraham is 75 years old; God promises him descendants, and his wife Sarah is barren; is promised a son; she laughs)
 2. Genesis 16:1-3
 - i. Abraham is 85 years old; the promised son is not born yet; both Sarah and Abraham become impatient;
 - ii. Sarah has the idea for Abraham to marry and have a child with Hagar, her servant;
 - iii. This was legal, but not the will of God; "God helps those who help themselves."
 3. Genesis 16:4-16
 - a. Abraham is 86 years old; Hagar is pregnant; Sarah becomes jealous and kicks Hagar out;
 - b. God intervenes; takes care of Hagar; sends her back;
 - c. Hagar gives birth to Ishmael (born of the flesh – that is, naturally)
 4. Genesis 17-18
 - a. Abraham is 99 years old; God speaks to him to remind him of the promised son;
 - b. Far in their age
 5. Genesis 21:1-7
 - a. Abraham is 100 years old; the promised son is born – Isaac (laughter);
 - b. What happens to Ishmael (14 years old) ?
 6. Genesis 21:8-14
 - a. Abraham is 103 years old; Ishmael mocked Isaac;
 - b. Problems are caused in the home – Hagar and Ishmael end up having to leave;

- ii. The status of their two mothers: Hagar (Egyptian servant) and Sarah (wife to Abraham)
 - iii. The circumstances of the two mothers: The flesh (Ishmael, born naturally), the promise (through divine intervention – can only be explained by the hand of God), and the problem (Ishmael mocked Isaac)
- b. Now, this may be interpreted allegorically –
- i. An allegory is different than a parable. A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning and it has ONE point. An allegory is a story that can have multiple meanings – in this case, Paul takes a historical event to drive his point on legalism –
 - ii. Allegories are used throughout the Bible (Psalm 23);
 - iii. Notice Paul’s care: “this may be” –
 - 1. The point here is that Paul is now going to explain the allegory behind this historical event:
 - a. Sarah and Hagar represent two covenants
 - i. Mount Sinai – this is where God gave Moses His law
 - ii. Mount Sinai (Arabia) represents a barren, desolate, dry, place – one where there is no spiritual vitality –
 - iii. Mount Sinai was nowhere near the promised land
 - iv. “Corresponds to the present Jerusalem” – the same issues that were taking place then are taking place now;
 - v. The Jerusalem that is above and free – this represents Sarah –
 - vi. Paul quotes Isaiah 54 where God through Isaiah speaks of the coming of Jesus – the birth of the church;
 - b. Legalism and Liberty
 - i. Hagar represents legalism;
 - 1. In legalism – there is no fruit, there is only harshness, coldness, and the absence of grace;
 - ii. Sarah represents liberty
 - 1. In liberty – there is transformation, there is an indwelling of the Spirit; bearing fruit of the Spirit;
 - 2. In liberty, in gospel freedom, in Christ, we recognize that there are no good Christians only transformed, humble, and repentant ones –
- c. Summary
- i. “She is our mother” –
 - ii. Either you are enslaved to legalism through the law or you belong to God because of what Jesus has done for you – but you cannot be both;

TRANSITION: Legalism kills godliness.

The Solution to Legalism (v. 28-31)

So, then, what is the solution to legalism? Paul now applies the allegory to the Galatians and in turn, to us:

a. Children of Promise

- i. He reminds them – they, formerly gentiles – are children of the promise God made to Abraham back in Genesis; that he would have many descendants through faith;
- ii. Church, you are the children of the promise – you have become a child of God through faith in Christ Jesus — that’s the solution! You belong to God through faith in Christ – the righteousness that you walk in is not your own!
 1. Identity;
 - a. Church, you are the children of the promise – you have become a child of God through faith in Christ Jesus — that’s the solution! You belong to God through faith in Christ – the righteousness that you walk in is not your own!
 2. Born again of the Spirit;
 - a. If you are a child of God through faith, then the Holy Spirit resides in you! You are able to bear fruit, walk in the Spirit, repent, and keep going!
 3. Reminder to hold fast (you will be persecuted);
 - a. Galatians were persecuted after coming to faith in Christ;
 - b. Isaac was persecuted when Ishamel began to mock him;
 - c. Get rid of the legalism and pursue godliness (v. 30)
 4. Pursue Godliness
 - a. Because the Holy Spirit works in us – sanctifying us – He also enables us to pursue godliness so that we would die to ourselves and live unto Jesus; even though we will stumble, we do not give up on the pursuit because we have God’s grace upon us, God’s promise resting in us –
 - i. “Godliness is not behavior. Godliness is the result of the gospel taking root in our hearts, producing the fruit of Godward love and obedience through an attitude of joy and gratitude. True godliness in the life of a sinner-saint is an imperfect experience, but an experience of grace nonetheless.”(Joe Thorn)
 - ii. “But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.” (1 Timothy 6:11)
 - iii. “So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.” (2 Timothy 2:22)

TRANSITION: Children of the promise pursue godliness in order to boast in the righteousness of Christ, not their own.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Legalism is a great irony:

- a. Legalism enslaves whereas grace liberates;
- b. Legalism breeds ungodliness whereas grace prompts godliness;
- c. Legalism destroys the church whereas grace builds the church;
- d. Legalism bears false witness whereas grace boasts in the beauty and splendor of Jesus

You cannot have both, church.

Christian/Non-Christian

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Benediction | Galatians 5:1

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.