

NO OTHER GOSPEL!

REFLECTIONS ON GALATIANS

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INTRODUCTION

There is a new hostility to Christianity arising in our world. In America, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, at least one very powerful political party has within it a group of secularists who hope that they may be able to paint orthodox, Bible-believing Christians as “fundamentalist” extremists. For them, there is no essential difference between a Christian and a member of an Islamic terrorist group. In fact, to them, the Christians probably do not have as much integrity as the Islamic group. After all, many Muslims have suffered political oppression. Surely they have only responded violently as the result of many years of suffering! They see them as intolerant, but with cause.

The Christians, on the other hand, have no cause to be so dogmatic about their faith! Why, if you ask them, they will tell you that the God of the Bible is the only true God! This of course is insulting to the members of other religions.

They will tell you that salvation is only found in Jesus Christ! Do they not understand that we live in a new and wonderful world in which diversity is the greatest good of all? We must be tolerant to the point of absurdity. We must affirm that all the world religions (no matter that they contradict each other at so many points) are equally valid. There are many ways to God (if in fact God exists) according to contemporary thought. No one way can be thought of as true, while others are found to be false.

Today tolerance is *not* defined as showing good will to those with whom you disagree, while seeking to persuade them of the truth of your faith. Today such a position is considered intolerant and sinister. And, there are increasingly loud voices calling for laws that enshrine this post modern understanding of truth.

In a sarcastic evaluation of this trend Gene Edward Veith has said, “The ancient Israelites should have been more inclusive in regard to idol worship; those who brought the images of Baal into the Temple were exhibiting inter-faith sensitivity. The early Christians should have recognized the spiritual value of Roman paganism; adding emperor worship would have made their faith more tolerant.”¹

¹Gene Edward Veith, *Christians as Taliban*, World Magazine, January 19,2002

The claim that God has revealed his truth to men in the Bible is abhorrent to many. But, in every age, it is the doctrine of salvation by grace through God's Son, Jesus Christ, that proves itself to be the greatest offense. All of the world's religions, save Christianity, offer some system of works righteousness as the way to the highest good. However "salvation" is defined, whether it is in a carnal paradise or in the idea of reincarnation into a higher state of existence, one must do certain things to achieve that "good." True Christianity teaches the very opposite of that.

The gospel of Christ has, from the beginning, defied the notion that man is improvable in his natural state. From the first, preachers like Paul and Peter taught that salvation is a gift from God, that salvation is needed because we are sinners, and that our only hope is in the righteousness of God's son. There is nothing in us that is of sufficient worth that we may use to bargain with God for eternal life. No, if we are to be saved, we must humble ourselves before God (a notion that is particularly offensive to modern man) and admit that we are, morally speaking, a foul smelling stench in his nostrils. We must put our faith in him, not ourselves. And we must not suppose that this is a matter of a mutual enterprise. We have no ability. We cannot add to the work of God. We are wholly at his mercy.

In the first century the apostle Paul had to confront an attempt to mix the grace of God, and the work of man, as the ground of human salvation. Such a teaching was not like the modern desire for diversity. It made a "truth" claim itself. But like all false religions including the modern variety, it ultimately proclaimed the ability and efforts of human beings as determinative. Man's work, not God's, was seen as the deciding feature of religion. The apostle of Christ could not avoid dealing with this early error. It struck at the heart of the faith.

Paul knew that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. He preached that only the righteousness of Christ can be the foundation of our hope before God. And, he did not hesitate to argue these truths with friend and foe alike. He knew that everything was at stake. He knew that, if you lose the gospel of salvation by grace, you have lost everything. It was out of that passion for the truth of God that Paul wrote his letter to the Galatian Christians.

1

PAUL'S AUTHORITY

If Paul's letter to the church at Rome is the most carefully composed of all the epistles from his hand, Galatians must be regarded as the passionate effort of the apostle to set forth the heart of the gospel message, and to defend it against all comers. There were many problems faced by the early church, troubles from without, and troubles from within. Within the church, the tendency of many to teach a "Jewish" version of the "gospel," which effectively emptied the gospel message of its truth and power, proved to be one of the greatest challenges to apostolic authority.

In the first century there were thousands of Jews who did not live in their homeland. They were the *diaspora*, Jews who, for various reasons, had been

scattered all over the civilized world. Many of these Jews came to profess faith in Christ. But among them were a large number who insisted that the ceremonial laws, found in the Old Testament, were still to be observed by all who became part of the Christian church. This was especially true of the requirement for all Jewish males to be circumcised. Circumcision was the sign of inclusion in the people of God, had been commanded by God, and had been practiced among the Jews since the days of Abraham.

But the apostles knew that to add anything to faith in Christ as the requirement for salvation was to destroy the gospel itself. Paul, as the “apostle to the Gentiles,” was horrified to discover that, among the professing Christians in Galatia, there were many who had come to accept this substitute “gospel.”

Paul began his letter to the Galatians by reminding them of his authority and its origin. The false teachers who had misled them had no such warrant from God. But Paul was called of God and had been chosen to represent the gospel cause to the Gentile world.

Paul, an apostle-- not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead-- and all the brothers who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: [1:1-2]

Before his conversion to Christ, Paul (Saul of Tarsus) had been one of the most active opponents of the church. He guarded the cloaks of the men who stoned Stephen, the first Christian martyr. (Acts 7:58) He made no secret of his hatred for the cause of Christ, and had received authority from the high priest to arrest and imprison Christians in the city of Damascus. He was on his way there when God providentially interrupted his malevolent plans. (Acts 9:1-2)

As Paul neared the city of Damascus, he suddenly saw a very bright light and heard the voice of Jesus Christ speaking to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4) The light had a blinding effect on Paul and he had to be led, by the hand, into the city of Damascus. The blindness lasted three days. Paul spent this time in fasting and prayer.

At the same time a man named Ananias, who was a follower of Christ, was given a vision from the Lord in which he was told to seek out Saul of Tarsus. Ananias was understandably concerned about his assignment. He was aware of all the mischief which Paul had committed against God’s people. He was also aware about the present mission of Paul to Damascus, and his intention of arresting all the professing Christians there. When Ananias questioned the wisdom of contacting Paul the Lord gave him a reassuring word. *But the Lord said to him, Go! For he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles*

and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. (Acts 9:15-16)

Paul's plans were to be set aside by the sovereign will of a very gracious God. The man who hated Christians came to faith in Christ, was called a "brother" by Ananias, was baptized, began to take food again, and was left to ponder what had happened to him. Turned around by the grace of God, he immediately began to preach that Jesus was the Son of God.

By the time Paul wrote his epistle to the Galatians he had been preaching the gospel, and suffering the consequences of that preaching, for many years. He reminded the Galatians that he had been the object of God's grace and calling.

It was God himself who had placed him in his present ministry. Whatever he would say to them about the nature of salvation should be received, not as the philosophical musings of a man, but as the word of God.

The question of authority has been a divisive problem in Christendom down through the ages. Over the years, several denominations have fallen into the error of supposing that the Bible (which contains the teaching of the prophets and apostles) is, in fact, the creation of the church. They have then gone on to reason that the church must have a greater authority than Scripture. This was one of the principal reasons for the great Reformation that took place in the sixteenth century in Europe. The Reformation was about reclaiming the true authority for our faith, the Bible.

In our day, many theological liberals have tried to portray the Bible as a noble creation of men who sought to express their deepest religious experiences.

But the Bible itself calls us back to the words of the apostles concerning the origin of their teaching.

Speaking of the Old Testament Scriptures, Peter said, "...men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." Paul wanted the Galatian Christians to know that he wrote to them as one inspired by the Spirit of God. If they refused to listen, they would err by rejecting, not the words of Paul alone, but the very truth of God given to them to be a "light" for their doctrinal pathway.

It is also customary for writers to provide an early introduction of certain themes that loom large in the latter portions of their work. By this method Paul lets us know that the gospel itself is to be his subject matter. Thus he begins with a reference to the death and resurrection of Christ. When he speaks of the Father's work in raising the Son from the dead Paul is taking us to the central verities of the faith. It was the death of our Lord that secured salvation for undeserving sinners. It was the resurrection that confirmed this saving work of Christ.

In this way Paul makes us aware, from the first, that all of his teaching has for its fountainhead the cross and the empty tomb. Had Christ not died in the place of his people, and had he not been raised from the dead there would have been no need to write this epistle to the Galatians, or any other for that matter. Paul had seen the Lord on the road to Damascus. He knew that Christ was alive and had called him to be his servant. Everything that Paul believed and taught was built on that foundation. This would especially be true of the present effort to correct the doctrinal error at work among the Galatians.

Questions for discussion:

1. Where did Paul's apostolic authority come from? cf. Ephesians 1:1
2. Why did the Israelites practice circumcision? Genesis 17:1-14, cf. Philippians 3:1-11
3. What was Paul's pre-conversion history? Acts 7:54-8:1 and 9:1-2
4. What central truths of the faith served as the foundation for Paul's teaching? cf. 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

2

GRACE AND PEACE

The gospel is a matter of history. It is not a collection of wise maxims. It is not a philosophical system. It is not about sentiment or the religious experience of mankind. It is a story about what God chose to do by sending his Son to earth on a rescue mission.

When Paul wrote to the church at Corinth he reminded them that this intervention by God, in human history, was the most important thing in all of his teaching. He called it the thing “of first importance.” (1 Corinthians 15:1-7) For Paul, as for all the apostles, what God had done in Christ for sinners, by his death on the cross and by his resurrection from the dead, was like a great mountain towering above all other historical events. Without this historical intervention there would have been no hope for mankind. The apostle always tied everything to the death and resurrection of Christ and he always gave an interpretation of those events. Sometimes the meaning of the cross and the empty tomb were presented in a very succinct manner. He told the Corinthians that these things of first importance were done “for our sins.” In Galatians Paul uses two words to introduce the meaning of the cross. The first is “grace” and the second is “peace.”

Grace to you and peace [1:3a]

The Grace of God

The heart issue which Paul had to address in order to confront the Judaizing influence which had made its mark in Galatia was the grace of God. What did the apostles mean by “grace?” The first century religions, as in our day, had a common thread running through them. The superficial characteristics varied, but all the religions preached the perfectibility of mankind by “good works.” Those “works” of course included the prescribed ritual obligations of the particular religion. In the case of the Judaizers the works of the ceremonial law held this place. The insistence on circumcision, in addition to faith in Christ, changed the gospel from one of a gospel of grace (salvation by faith in Christ alone) to a “gospel” of works. Faith itself was changed and thus transformed into something else.

Paul knew that to attach something to faith in Christ, as a requirement for salvation, destroyed the essential character of faith. Many had come to believe that Christ was the Messiah, but their faith was now in a deliverer who did not completely save from sin. He opened the door of salvation, but left it to mankind to finish the “redeeming” work by adding to his work. By being circumcised and keeping the “works of the law” people would save themselves.

But Paul would have none of that! Salvation was a matter of grace. And grace for the apostle Paul was not about what man does, or has done, but about what God has done and is doing for sinners. Paul told the Ephesians that grace is like a gift. (Ephesians 2:8-10) One does not work for a gift. One works for wages. Wages are the deserved reward for one’s efforts. Salvation, according to Paul, is not like that at all. It is the gift of God.

Not only that, the striking thing about this grace of God is that it has been given, not to the good and deserving, (Paul taught that such a category does not exist, Romans 3:9-11), but to undeserving sinners. God was under no obligation to save anyone. But he is a merciful God who has devised a plan to save the undeserving. He would send his sinless Son to accomplish this, and it would necessitate his death at the hands of sinners. Because of what Christ would do, by his death and resurrection, salvation would be offered, without the suggestion of any human contribution. This would be the way of grace.

The Peace of God

The other word which Paul uses early in his letter to the Galatians is “peace.” This word encompasses two principal areas. The first is the truth that because

God's grace has come to us in Christ we are no longer the enemies of God. Throughout the Bible humanity is presented as opposed to the purposes of God. Men and women are regarded as set against God. We transgress his righteous laws and this is the principal indication that something is very wrong with us, at the core of our beings. We are not friends of God. Our sins have identified us as people who deserve to have God's wrath poured out on us. But the gospel teaches us that we have been reconciled to God. He is now our friend, and the best friend that we could ever have.

There is another aspect of the peace which the Lord gives as well. The Hebrews thought of peace as more than the absence of conflict. Their *shalom* (peace) included the idea of wholeness and blessing. This truth lies behind the use of the word "peace" in the New Testament. Not only has the Lord ended the state of warfare that existed between God and man, he has brought undeserving sinners into a sphere of blessing. We now enter into a quality of spiritual life that is only possible because of who Christ is and what he has done for us.

from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, [1:3b]

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul begins laying his doctrinal foundation by giving a clear statement of what the Father did in eternity for our salvation, what the Son has done to save us, and what the Holy Spirit does to apply the salvation that was won by Christ's cross. In Galatians Paul's purpose in writing is different, and so he does not spend as much time discussing the work of the persons of the Godhead. Still, Paul wants the Galatians to be reminded that the grace, which is theirs in Christ, and the peace which has come to them through Christ, are the gifts of the true and living God, who is fatherly in his disposition toward his people. By identifying the source of this grace and peace as the Father, along with the Lord Jesus Christ, he implies the deity of Christ. This is what he taught in detail in other epistles. (cf.. Colossians 1:15-18)

who gave himself for our sins [1:4a]

Paul is here referring to the double sided problem that we have as lost, unregenerate sinners. The first part of our problem is that our transgressions, our sins, need to be forgiven. We all, in time, become people who break the law of God. There is clearly something wrong with us that causes us to sin, without exception. There is not one member of the human race, save the Lord Jesus Christ, who was or is without sin. Our sins separate us from our Maker. He is holy and sinless. Unless a way could be found to cleanse us of sin we would have been

alienated from the Lord forever. But Christ gave himself “for our sins.” This is the great gospel truth that the Savior became a substitute for us. We should have died. That would have been the appropriate penalty for our sins against a loving and holy God. We should have experienced death and decay, for all eternity, in a conscious state of torment. But Christ came and took our sins on himself. Paul is even so bold as to say to the church at Corinth that “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.” (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Since Christ has taken the penalty for our sins on himself, we find forgiveness only through him. He went to the cross for his people. He bore our guilt. He, who was sinless, became sin for us. Christ’s death makes our forgiveness by God a reality. God will not involve himself in sin. He will not compromise with sin or excuse sin. But, by the atoning death of Christ, a way has been made for undeserving sinners to be justified in the sight of God. The price for our redemption has been paid. Now, with our sins washed away, we can stand in the very presence of God. We have no righteousness of our own, but Christ’s righteous obedience has been credited to our account. We receive the forgiveness of God.

to deliver us from the present evil age, [1:4b]

We are responsible for our sins. For that we need forgiveness. But there is a second part of the problem. We are enslaved by the world, the flesh, and the devil. We are caught in a terrible snare. This is not something that we are responsible for. We were born into this state of affairs. Mere forgiveness cannot release us from this aspect of our sin problem. We need to be rescued.

And so, the apostle Paul speaks of Christ, by his death, as rescuing us from this present evil age. The word of God presents history as linear in character. The present age is Godless, hostile to righteousness, and spiritually dark. It holds people in the bondage of ignorance. We do not have the knowledge of God that we need to live in a way that is for our blessing, and for God’s glory. But, out ahead, there is a coming age of righteousness.

One day a new and perfect world will arrive. A day will dawn that is free of all sin and sorrow. Christ will come again to bring to fulness what he won by his death and resurrection. Those who come to know him in this present age are not only forgiven their sins, they are delivered from the spiritual bondage that is so much a part of life in this world, or *age*. This is why we say that people need to be saved. We need to be rescued from ourselves, from our inclination to sin, from the temptations and philosophies of this world, and from the unseen

power of the satanic world.

When the Lord died on the cross he not only secured pardon for us for our sins, he also ripped us from the kingdom of darkness (Colossians 1:13), and tenderly placed us in a new realm which is called the “kingdom” of the Son. The Christian is someone who already is experiencing some of the benefits of the coming age.

We are no longer enslaved by this world and its error. We, by faith, can begin to live as citizens of God’s kingdom. We can begin to live in the way that we will live forever. We will do this imperfectly in this life. But our rescue has been accomplished.

We live in the present age but we are not the children of that age. We live in the present age but we cannot be successfully controlled by this world.

We have tasted the coming age. We want to be like Christ and he is the Lord of the age to come.

according to the will of our God and Father, [1:4c]

The sovereign design of God is always foundational to the teaching of the apostles. Paul refers here to the will of the Father which was shaped in eternity, then brought to earth by Christ, and applied to our hearts by the work of the Spirit. Our salvation is no accident. It is nothing less than the purpose of God being worked out. The work of the Father is usually expressed in terms of time. It was the Father who chose us to be saved, the Son who came and purchased our redemption by his death on the cross, and the Holy Spirit who applies that work to our hearts, in our own time and experience.

The work of the Father, in choosing a people for himself, is said to have been done *before the creation of the world*. (Ephesians 1:4) Paul is always careful to make certain that we understand where our salvation originated. It did not come from below, from the earth. It came down from above. In fact, it was the result of an eternal plan of salvation. We are not only saved because Christ died for us, but because the Father chose to save us long before these things were worked out in the history of the world.

to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen. [1:5]

If this work of salvation was designed by the Father before the world began, the honor and glory for it cannot be shared by men. It is God’s doing and he must receive the praise for it. That worship which is due God by his redeemed creatures will be the marrow of our experience in the future. We will worship and give glory to God for all the ages, world without end.

Questions for discussion:

1. What does Paul mean by “grace?” Cf. Ephesians 2:1-10
2. What does Paul mean by “peace?” Who were we warring against? Cf. Colossians 1:13-14
3. What does it mean to say that the Lord Jesus Christ gave himself “for our sins?”
4. Are Christians at present most at home in this world, or in the next?
5. What does it mean to say that God chose us before the creation of the world?

3

A DIFFERENT GOSPEL

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel-- not that there is another one... [1:6-7a]

There cannot be several different versions of the “good news” or gospel. The age that the Galatians lived in was in many ways very similar to our own. People often followed more than one “god.” They thought it likely that there were many ways of “salvation.” The prudent man or woman would seek the services of several religions, just in case one might be more effective than another. Often these various ways to union with the deity might contradict each other.

No matter. There are many paths that lead to the same place.

Our present day has been strongly influenced by the teaching that there are many paths to God. This is the analogy that is usually given; a mountain may have many paths leading up to the summit, but all the paths arrive at the same place.

Paul will have none of this. He calls the Christians in Galatia to remember that they had been taught that the person and work of Jesus Christ is unique. He is very surprised that they have forgotten their instruction so soon after their conversion. There are not many paths to God. There is only one way that leads to the Father. Christ himself had said, *I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* (John 14:6)

The message that the apostles preached was not one among many. An y so-called gospel which taught a system of salvation, contradicting the true gospel of Christ, could not be called the gospel. Such preaching was not true and therefore such preaching was not good news at all!

But there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. [1:7b-9]

The gospel is not dependent on the person of the preacher. Paul insists that should *he* preach a different gospel, even though he is an apostle of Christ, he should be rejected. Even if an angel should come down from heaven and preach something other than the gospel of salvation by faith in Christ, that angel should be *anathema*, condemned for all eternity. Does God take the matter of truth seriously? Does God judge those who mislead the lost people of this world and who mislead his children with clever arguments? Indeed he does!

For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. [1:10]

Implicit in this question is one of the common denominators of all false religion. It is designed to please men by constructing a system of "salvation" that appeals to their vanity and notions of spiritual competence. Men think themselves worthy of salvation, or think that by their good works they can make themselves acceptable to God. Preaching that plays to the desires of its audience

and offers “salvation” by human endeavor, or by a combination of God’s work, and that of man, is essentially pleasing to human beings. Paul warned Timothy that the last days would be characterized by a desire on the part of many to have only preaching that was soothing to them. *For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.* (2 Timothy 4:3-4) But when one preaches the truth of man’s inability before God, his message may not please human beings, but will certainly please the Author of all truth.

The apostle Paul could look back on his own past as a time when he was in fact only a pretender to servanthood. But he was not serving God, he was serving men, and trying to please the men who urged him to persecute those who were coming to faith in Jesus Christ. After his conversion Paul would not allow himself to be a “man-pleaser.” He would only serve the Lord, no matter what the cost. Friends might depart but still he would continue on in the path that the Lord had chosen for him.

For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. [1:11]

Another common characteristic of all the religions of this world is that they are “locally” produced. The great basic distinguishing feature of true religion is that it comes by revelation from God himself. The religions of this world are the products of creative minds. They are all man made. We can well celebrate the creativity of mankind as a great gift from God our creative father. We can and should give glory and honor to the Lord for all the good creative works of mankind, whether small or great. But we must never believe that the good news which God has spoken to us in Christ is in any way the product of man. It is wholly the gift of God originating in his mind and his alone.

For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; but, I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. [1:12]

Just as God had spoken “through the prophets at various times and in many ways” (cf. Hebrews 1:1) and just as the Father had given revelation in the Son, the apostles of the Lord had now become the recipients of divine revelation. They would be used to bring this direct and special revelation to completion. And, Paul explains that it was the Savior himself who had spoken to him, and continued to do so, by the work of the Spirit in Paul’s life.

For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. [1:13-14]

Paul, then known by his Hebrew name Saul, was present at the martyrdom of Stephen. Luke, writing in Acts 8:1 tells us that Saul “was there, giving approval...” Shortly thereafter, Paul began trying to systematically destroy the church. He sought and received the authority to arrest and imprison both men and women. (cf. Acts 8:3) Not satisfied with confining his activities to the homeland of the Jews, he asked for the authority to enter the synagogues in Damascus as well, in order to search out those who were professing faith in Christ.

By this time Paul was regarded as a bright young man who was clearly “on his way up” in the institutional life of Judaism. He had studied under a famous teacher, Gamaliel. From Gamaliel, Paul had learned the law and the need to be zealous (cf. Acts 22:3) But Paul’s teacher demonstrated a wise caution when the Sanhedrin arrested Peter and the other apostles. Gamaliel told the Sanhedrin in “executive session” that if the preaching of the apostles was of human origin it would be sure to fail, but that if it was indeed the work of God, it would succeed. In that event the leaders of Israel would find themselves “fighting against God.” This was a lesson that Paul had not learned from Gamaliel, and would only learn by a direct confrontation with the Lord himself on the road to Damascus.

But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia and returned again to Damascus. [1:15-17]

The heart issue that the Galatian Christians were in danger of forgetting was the place of the work of God in their salvation. If they adopted a composite view which made the work of God important, but dependent on the work of man (circumcision), then the doctrine of salvation by grace would have been lost. Paul speaks to them about his own experience.

It was God, Paul says, who set him apart. This setting apart was from birth or literally “from my mother’s womb.” Asked the question, “Paul, why are you a Christian today?” he could have replied, “because I have faith in Christ.” But

Paul knew that one could also look back before the time when he had come to faith in Christ, and see that it was the work of God on his behalf which made the crucial difference between him and an unbeliever. God, Paul says, had in fact “set him apart” even when he was unborn. When he was still in his mother’s womb and unable to understand the gospel, much less believe it, God had singled him out for salvation and for a specific service. God did it, not man.

This was an action of God which Paul describes as being called by grace. Grace is the undeserved love of God. Paul had done nothing in his mother’s womb to deserve such treatment. God had done this, not because of anything in Paul, but because of the love which existed eternally in the heart of God.

Often people balk at this teaching from the word of God. They will say, “but of course Paul could have refused to be saved,” because they believe that only such a possibility would safeguard their notion of freewill. But the Bible never even raises such a possibility.

The same thing was true of the prophet Jeremiah. The early passages of his prophecy speak of this truth.

*“Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,
Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”* (Jeremiah 1:4-5)

It is clear from the testimony of scripture that the Lord has an eternal purpose which he intends to “work out.” In the context of a discussion of the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in salvation, Paul told the church at Ephesus, *In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will...* [Ephesians 1:11]

The end result of this purpose of God to save Paul, and to call him into the service of God, was the revealing of the Son in Paul’s life. What God had started in eternity he would now bring to fulfillment in Paul’s life. And so it was that, on the road to Damascus, when he was as great an enemy of Christ as lived on the face of the earth, the apostle Paul was stopped short in his tracks by the purpose and grace of God. He was confronted by Christ himself, and brought to salvation.

In all of this, Paul would later realize, his contribution was “nil.” God had done it all, therefore salvation is not the work of man, or even a composite of the work of God and man, it is wholly the work of God. And, if wholly the work of God, it is salvation by grace!

Paul also wanted the Galatians to understand that the message (gospel) which he preached was not something which he had learned from other men. All of us learn the gospel in this way. But Paul had not. He had gone into Arabia and then later back to Damascus. God had taught this apostle the truths of the gospel himself. Even the manner of Paul's instruction would be an example of the grace of God.

Not only had the Lord saved Paul by grace but he had instructed him in the whole counsel of God without human assistance. The gospel message itself would be kept free of any "works teaching" or any other agenda which might have arisen by the invention of man.

Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me. [1:18-24]

Salvation is free. This foundational truth would never be surrendered by the apostle Paul. But the grace of God does not lead us into laziness concerning our responsibility to Christ. Paul had remained a stranger to most of the Christians who had either felt his persecuting hand (before he became a believer himself) or had heard about his intense hostility toward the church. But it is impossible to keep secret the transforming work of God. Reports came to the Judean Christians about Paul. They could hardly believe it. The very man who had sought legal authority to arrest them, and to imprison and even kill them, was now preaching the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ! What do we learn from this? Grace transforms lives. The eternal purpose of God at work in the life of the apostle Paul had made him a radically different man. The reaction of God's people to Paul's amazing transformation was to praise God. Contemporary Christians would probably be inclined to praise Paul. "Have you heard? The man who was once our persecutor has changed his ways. He is preaching the gospel! We can't understand why. How can such a thing have taken place? Paul must have just had a great change of heart! Isn't he wonderful!"

But the Christians in the first century knew that God is the only one who has the power to change a sinner's heart and turn his life around. They praised God, giving him the glory for what had happened.

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. [2:1-2]

Paul was not unconcerned about the wise counsel of godly men. He was an apostle, chosen to have a very productive ministry to the Gentiles. He was receiving direct revelation from God. Still, this apostle was very much aware of the responsibility that we have as believers not to consider ourselves beyond error. The Lord has placed us in his church. We are not just saved individuals. We need the body of Christ. And so the apostle Paul sought out the counsel of the brethren in Jerusalem.

But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in-- who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery-- to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. [2:3-5]

Paul knew that he was not beyond error, but he also knew the gospel and the implications of it. He would not allow himself, when criticized, to retreat from the truth revealed to him by the Lord. When the "Greek" (Gentile) Titus was made the subject of the Judaizers call for faith in Christ *plus* circumcision, Paul would not give in. The issue was too important. It was the nature of the gospel itself.

And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)-- those, I say who seemed influential added nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. [2:6-10]

The brethren at Jerusalem met with Paul and heard him explain in detail

the message that he had been preaching throughout the Gentile world. Paul tells us that they added nothing. The Judaizers were preaching a message that included the truth that Jesus of Nazareth was the long expected Messiah. They even told people that they must believe this truth. But they also taught the necessity of circumcision for all the male believers who embraced Jesus as the Christ. This implied, from the beginning, that such “believers” would endeavor to keep the ceremonial law. In addition to faith in Christ, such things were seen to be essential for eternal salvation.

Paul would have none of this. He knew that to do so would imperil the gospel message of salvation by grace alone. And James, Peter, and John who were “reputed” to be leaders of the church at Jerusalem agreed with Paul. They extended their hand as a sign of fellowship and thus encouraged Paul to continue with his work.

Notice that Paul mentions James before he mentions Peter. Peter is clearly only one of the three “leaders” of the church at Jerusalem. Various people, down through the centuries, have sought to identify Peter as the head of the church. We know from biblical evidence that Peter was one of the apostles and often played a leading role. But there is no biblical reason to think that he alone held authority over all believers.

The leaders of the Jerusalem church merely asked Paul to remember the poor, meaning the poor in the environs of Jerusalem. Paul would be faithful to do just that. In time he would raise a great offering for the relief of those very Christians.

Questions for discussion:

1. How many true gospels exist? Cf. 1 Corinthians 15:1-11
2. How seriously does God regard the teaching of a false gospel?
3. Who taught Paul the gospel?
4. When did God decide that Paul would be a Christian, and an apostle?
5. Did Paul regard Peter as the greatest authority in the church?

4

PETER'S INCONSISTENT BEHAVIOR

“If you were a Christian, you would not do that!” How many times have we heard some similar refrain. But the truth is that very often Christians behave in very sinful ways. We have not yet been made perfect. That day will only come when we go to be with the Lord, and even then, though moral perfection will be ours, we will not yet be “complete.” We will await the great hope of all God’s people, the resurrection of the body. We have a long way to go. For the present, there is the problem of sin that remains in our lives, and we must struggle against it. That is where the apostle Peter failed the test.

Hypocrisy and true believers

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. [2:11-13]

It is difficult to imagine that Cephas, or Peter, with his past experience, would be the apostle who would come to err in this way. When Cornelius, the Italian centurion, was called by God to salvation, it was Peter who received a vision from the Lord that made clear the Lord’s intention to save, not only Jews, but Gentiles as well. The Jews had come to regard Gentiles as “unclean,” and to think of themselves as superior to the Gentiles. But when Peter went up on the roof of the house of Simon the tanner to pray in private, he fell into a trance and

saw things that must have astonished him. *And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals, and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: "Rise Peter, kill and eat."* (Acts 10:10-13)

Peter protested to the Lord that, as a good practicing Jew, he had never eaten any thing that could be described as "unclean." A voice from heaven replied, *What God has made clean, do not call common.* (Acts 10:15b) At that point Peter was left wondering what the vision might mean. He was soon to discover that men from the house of the Gentile Cornelius had arrived, and were calling for him. He was told to go with them without hesitation.

Not only did Peter go and enter the house of Cornelius, something that Jews were loath to do, but he preached the gospel to all of those who were there, and saw the mighty hand of God displayed. While Peter preached, the Holy Spirit came on those who were assembled there. Peter saw this and asked, *Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.* (Acts 10:47) It was Peter who commanded that the now Christian Gentiles should be baptized, and it was Peter who stayed for a few days in the house of Cornelius.

But now, some time later, Peter was found at Antioch when "certain men came from James." And now, Peter would turn back on the truth that had been revealed to him concerning the inclusive character of God's salvation. Why would such a thing take place? The men came from James. But James was no bigot. He taught that God does not show favoritism, and that we are to follow the example of the Lord in that. (James 2)

Most likely, Peter simply assumed that the men who came from Jerusalem would fault him for the very "liberated" lifestyle that he was following. He thought nothing about associating with Gentiles and having table fellowship with them.

But when these men arrived, he suddenly quit eating with Gentiles. Peter had given in to fear. He was afraid of these men who were of the "circumcision group."

And fear rendered him useless to the Lord for a time. The scriptures give us other examples of this immobilization through fear at work in the lives of God's servants. For example, after a great victory over the prophets of Baal, Elijah gave in to fear of the wicked queen Jezebel. He demonstrated an inconsistent way of thinking that seems to afflict even the best of men. (1 Kings 19)

On this occasion Peter was instrumental in leading others into sin. Even the great teacher Barnabas who, by his disposition and behavior, was normally a great encouragement to others, was led astray by Peter's failure to consistently

keep the faith. Paul was not afraid of Peter or anyone else. He says,

But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" [2:14]

Paul knew that an inconsistent lifestyle negates the gospel message. You may be saying all the right things, but if you are doing all the wrong things the message is made null and void in the eyes of the world, and in the eyes of other Christians.

Paul told the Colossians, *Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.* (Colossians 3:11) Racial distinctions, national distinctions, cultural, economic, and class distinctions fall by the wayside in Christ. The ground at the foot of the cross is level. Our only "qualification" for needing the Lord is that we were all sinners. And we were all saved, not by works or status, but by grace alone. In Christ, we are called to receive our brothers and sisters to ourselves, without prejudice.

Both Jew and Gentile saved by faith

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. [2:15-16]

Paul reminds his readers that though many of them, like Peter and like himself, were born Jewish, they had come to reject the legalistic perversion of Old Testament religion which Judaism had become. They loved the moral law of God. They knew that God's law had a very important part to play in their lives and the lives of all God's people. They knew that lost people needed the law to bring them to their senses! They knew that lost people were required to reckon with God's standard of righteousness. Only then could they see themselves as sinners who had failed to meet that standard. They would have to understand that the law condemns us and sends us to hell, and that is just what we deserve!

But Paul would never allow his respect for God's glorious law to be perverted. He would not make the law a method of salvation. Only Christ had perfectly

fulfilled the law. Only the perfect obedience of Christ would be acceptable to God. Only Christ could save.

And so the apostle insists that faith must not have for its object, the law, our obedience to the law, or any thing other than Christ. Paul reminds his Jewish readers that though they considered the Gentiles to be “Gentile sinners,” (vs.15) in fact, both Jews and Gentiles were under the same judgement for failing to keep the demands of God’s law. And once again, Paul sets *law keeping*, as a means of salvation, and *faith*, in opposition to each other.

It is nothing less than the hope of standing before a holy God, as pure and spotless servants, that is in view here. It is justification that men are seeking. Those who seek it by means of law keeping, will fail. They will fail because God demands nothing less than perfect obedience to his will. The only man who has been perfectly obedient is Christ.

Therefore, those who seek to be justified by faith, (that is, faith in Christ), will find purity and a standing before God that cannot be assailed. They will stand before the Father robed in the perfect righteousness of Christ, which has been given to them as a gift. They, by depending on Christ, who alone is perfectly righteous, will be able to stand in the dreadful day of judgement.

God will accept them in his Son. He will not remember their sins. In that great forensic drama, he will only see his Son and the Son’s righteousness. And there will be no discrimination between the Old Testament people of God, the Jews, and all the other nations. All will either be found righteous in Christ or they will not.

But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! [2:17]

The Judaizers taught a system of salvation by “keeping the law.” Actually, they required people to keep the laws of Moses, as they had been interpreted by Rabbis over the years. This included an overwhelming collection of rules and regulations often contradicting one another. And so they had to invent disingenuous ways of getting around the requirements of their own teaching. Our Lord Jesus Christ accused the Pharisees of this kind of behavior. (cf. Matthew 15:1-20)

They also charged the followers of Christ with permitting, and even advocating all sorts of lawless behavior. In doing so, they accused our Lord Jesus Christ of being a rebel against God’s law who encouraged others to rebel as well. The Judaizers argued that to place Jews and Gentiles together, by teaching that they both must be saved by God’s gift of grace given to them in Christ, would

be to implicate the Lord in crimes against God and against the law. Would God not be seen as excusing sin, and not giving it just punishment. They, of course, ignored the cross of Christ, and the judgement which the Lord had poured out on the sins of his people there. They did not believe in Christ or his cross, and they did believe in their ability to make themselves acceptable in the sight of God.

Paul will have none of this. Behind his denial of the position of these false teachers is the truth which he preached again and again. Because of who Christ is, and because of what Christ accomplished by his death on the cross, God can now be both just (innocent) and the justifier (the one who declares undeserving sinners innocent). For Paul there was no contradiction at all. God had done what only God could do. He had come to the rescue of sinners. He had satisfied the demands of the law by a life lived in obedience to it. He had also provided deliverance for sinners that would be offered to them as a gift.

They were, after all, undeserving, and that was the point of what the law had taught in the sacrificial system. Thousands of animals were sacrificed to signify that sin was to be taken seriously, and that it led to the death of the sinner or the death of the sinner's substitute. Christ had come to do what the blood of animals could not do. (Hebrews 10:1-4) His sacrificial death procured genuine salvation for God's people. He did not become an accomplice in the crimes of human beings by forgiving those crimes. He had suffered the punishment due them, and that was acceptable to the Father above.

For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law so that I might live to God. [2:18-19a]

The context would suggest that Paul still has in mind the error of Peter. Peter had come to understand and to preach the doctrine of justification by faith. He did so with conviction. But his refusal to eat with Gentiles, when he felt threatened by the opinions of the Jewish believers from Jerusalem, was not consistent with what he preached. Peter needed to grow in his understanding of the gospel and its application. By refusing to eat with Gentiles and thus live out the truth that salvation is for all who come to Christ, and that in Christ they are brothers indeed, he placed himself back into a legalistic pattern of behavior.

To try to live again under the ceremonial dictates of the law, or under some latter day perversion of those principles, would be to fail to apply the principle of justification. It would be to "rebuild" what had been destroyed by his faith in Christ. This would never do.

The new age in Christ had come. People are saved by grace. To live in a way which might encourage them to try and achieve salvation by works, or to add works to faith as the ground of salvation, would harm the cause of Christ.

This insistence on justification by grace, without any addition of works, gave the enemies of the gospel the opportunity to accuse Paul and the other disciples of antinominanism, (teaching people that it is just fine to ignore one or more of the ten commandments). The people who wanted to add law keeping, and specifically circumcision, to faith in Christ, accused Paul of preaching that one can sin without consequence, if one has faith in Christ.

Perhaps there had been those who had criticized Peter in this way, "Peter, it is sin to eat with Gentiles. If you justify yourself in doing this by your doctrine that salvation is by faith in Christ, not by works, you make Christ an accomplice in sin!"

This was not what Paul preached. He speaks here of being justified "in" Christ. We are not merely declared to be righteous in Christ. We are justified in him, but the Holy Spirit has come into our hearts and now lives within. God is not merely declaring us to be holy, he is working to make us truly holy. A very important part of that work is the desire that he has placed in his people to love him and to serve him. They do these things imperfectly in this present life, but they are not unchanged. They once despised the law and proved it by their sins. They pointed to their own supposed good works as the ground of their salvation. But now, to do that, would be to try and rebuild a system that could only demonstrate the truth that we are sinners. (Verse 18)

The system of law-keeping was never able to save anyone. Only grace could do that. But the sinner who is saved by grace is *created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.* (Ephesians 2:10b) Such works will prove that he has been saved by grace.

I have been crucified with Christ. [2:19b]

The great activity of the Lord which brought about this extraordinary relationship with God, was the cross of Christ. It was not the cross as an independent event, but the cross as our experience, by faith in Christ. When we placed our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ it is as if we died with him on the cross. We, of course, were unworthy to be offered up as a sacrifice to the Lord. Only Christ could die in the place of sinners. But his death was for his chosen people. They may be said to be *in* him. He was our representative.

When the Lord endured the shame and suffering of the cross he did it for us. It is as if we were there, in him. By faith we died to sin and the condemnation

of the law. We did this two thousand years ago. Now of course, that is not literally true. We were not present when the Lord was crucified. When the song asks the question, "Were you there when they crucified the Lord?" it is not asking you if you lived two thousand years ago, and actually witnessed the events that took place, on that most important day in history. It is asking if you have faith in Christ.

Everyone who depends on Jesus Christ for salvation discovers that we have been so closely united with the Lord in the benefits of what he accomplished, that it can be said that we died with him. We were crucified with him, and we were buried with him, and we rose on the third day with him.

The spiritual benefits of this relationship to God through Christ are infinite. We died (spiritually speaking) and we were spiritually resurrected from the dead. All that the Lord presently has is ours. In one passage Paul says we have been given "fulness" in Christ. (Colossians 2:10) This comes just after the apostle has reminded us that all the fulness of Deity lives in bodily form in Jesus Christ. Paul is not implying that we have become little "gods," he is reminding us that all that Christ needed to do to save us fully, was done at Calvary. And, he is reminding us that we are not lacking in any good thing.

Whatever we need for salvation in this life, or in the next, is ours in Jesus Christ.

Those who would try to add something to faith in Christ for salvation are in error. And, it is sad to think that such error can lead men and women to an eternity in the fires of hell.

It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. [2:20a]

One of Paul's recurring themes is our identification with the Lord in his death and resurrection and the implications of that reality. Christ died and we died with him. Christ lives again and we live with him. The old lost unregenerate man has died. The man who lived in ways that opposed the purposes of God is no more. The man who was a citizen of the domain of darkness no longer lives.

The practical importance of this is that now the appreciative Christian can, by faith, put to death those things that are inconsistent with the righteousness of Christ. (cf. Colossians 3:5-11) And such a Christian will also know the power and blessing of the resurrection of the Lord. We live with him and he also lives in us. By the indwelling of the Spirit of God we are being transformed.

And 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. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose [2:20b-21]

In this way the apostle makes clear to us that all of this, dying with Christ, living with Christ, and being indwelt by Christ, with all the practical outworking of these things, is a matter of sheer grace. God has done it all. It was God who set in motion the plan of salvation that sent the Son to earth. It was God the Son who died and who was raised to life on the third day. It was God who loved us enough to die for us on the cross. As, Charles Wesley said, “Amazing love, how can it be, that thou my God, shouldst die for me?” It was God the Son who emerged from the grave victor over sin and death and hell. We, by grace, have been united with Christ in all that he has done for us. We have done nothing.

Our present life is a life of faith, that is, a life lived in dependence on Christ for righteousness, for direction, and for power.

Questions for discussion:

1. Why was it surprising that Peter would fall into hypocritical behavior with regard to the Gentiles? Cf. Acts 10
2. Is there one way of salvation for Jews and another for Gentiles?
3. What did the death of Christ accomplish that the Old Testament animal sacrifices never could? Cf. Hebrews 10:1-4
4. Why is it important to know that we have been united with the Lord in his crucifixion?

BEWITCHED BELIEVERS

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain-- if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith-- just as Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness? [3:1-6]

The Galatians needed to return to their original experience. Just as Israel was reminded of the Exodus and of the redemptive character of that experience, Paul reminds the Galatian Christians that they had begun by the preaching and hearing of the gospel of Christ. That gospel was good news because it was about what God had done, and about what he is presently doing for undeserving sinners.

They had not begun by hearing various teachers of the law. They did not come to Christ by the way of the law. They were not told, "Keep the ten commandments and you will be saved!"

On the contrary, they now appeared to be like foolish people who had allowed themselves to be beguiled and led astray. False teachers had come and painted what may have appeared to be a very attractive picture of supposed blessing as the outcome of following their false gospel. As with Hansel and Gretel, the witch had placed a gingerbread house before them and they had rushed in to enjoy its pleasures. They had been bewitched!

Now they must return in their minds to the beginning of their Christian pilgrimage. They must think back and recall that they were pointed to the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. They must remember that they responded to a message of salvation. They were offered rescue by Christ. God would forgive their sins. God would justify them by the righteousness of Christ. They were asked to believe this gospel message and thus receive the gift of God.

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached

the gospel beforehand, saying "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. [3:7-9]

Paul first appealed to the history of gospel preaching among them (vs. 1). Then he turned to their experience of responding to the gospel of grace (verses 2-6). Now he will turn to the scriptures for an illustration of salvation by faith, not by works (vss. 7-9). He will turn to the patriarch Abraham. Was not righteousness his because he believed what God said to him? Did not the Lord call on Abraham to trust him and to believe his word? Did he not announce future blessing, even for the Gentiles, and this most likely would have included most of the Galatian Christians? Did he not require Abraham to believe that what God had said would most certainly come to pass?

Not only did Abraham believe that God would bring to fulfillment the promises made to him, he also believed that God would bring to the earth the means of his salvation. He did not know the details of God's redemptive plan. But he was given some insight into the future, and into the blessing of that future. He believed God, and God imputed righteousness to his account. He did not rely on keeping any law, even the good commandments of God, or on any supposed good works on his part. He was a man of faith and not of works, and as a man of faith he stands justified before God! Every true Christian becomes a child of Abraham, by faith in Christ alone.

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the law, and do them. Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." [3:10-11]

Here is the great "deficiency" of the law. It is good and holy and was given by God. But it can only provide a curse for those who are lost. Sinners stand before the holy law of God and are evaluated by its standard of righteousness.

The result is that every human being who has ever lived on the face of the earth, except one, or every human being who will ever live on the face of the earth, except for one, is regarded as sinful and deserving of eternal punishment. God's wrath is directed toward lawbreakers and all of us fall into that category. (cf. Romans 2:12-16)

The law can show us our sin, but it has no power to save. The essence of false religion is found in the tendency of human beings to take God's righteous standard (the law), and pretend that it can be kept in a way that God will accept.

The people of this world are convinced that, whatever deity they have imagined, can be satisfied by their good works. They believe that they can “be good enough.” But the law of God was never intended to provide a way of salvation. It was only intended to show sinners their lost condition and their need for God’s grace. (cf. Romans 7:7-13)

Paul has quoted from the prophet Habakkuk *...but the righteous shall live by his faith*” (Habakkuk 2:4b), in order to show that salvation was always a matter of depending on God to grant undeserving sinners his gift of righteousness. He reasons that if this was always the way of salvation then obviously the pathway of legal obedience will not do.

But the law is not of faith, rather, “The one who does them shall live by them.” [3:12]

When one commits himself or herself to the belief that what we do can save us and that human beings have the ability to please God by legal obedience, there is no hope of pardon for such a person. The way that they have chosen leads only to Mount Sinai. There the finger of accusation is pointed toward them saying, “You are a transgressor of God’s holy law!” There is not the faintest glimmer of hope in such a situation. But the gospel shows how the curse of the law was dealt with by Christ.

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree-- so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit by faith. [3:13-14]

This is the great wisdom of God that is truly beyond human comprehension. Worldly rulers do not offer to take the punishment due their subjects. They do not say “take the axe and chop my head off instead.” But the Lord Jesus Christ began his identification with sinners with the incarnation itself. He took to himself the “likeness” of sinful human flesh. When he presented himself for baptism he was identifying with sinners. And when he died on the cross he was becoming a curse for sinners. He died the death that we all deserved. The Jews had long regarded the public exposure of hanging as a curse to be avoided at all costs. But the Lord Jesus Christ willingly accepted the sign of being accursed in order to show that he was in reality taking the curse of God’s wrath, poured out on sins, upon himself.

The amazing result would be, not only the salvation of the Jews, but the

ingathering of Gentiles as well. The whole world would become the object of God's redeeming grace in Christ. The "blessing" that most of the Jews had thought belonged only to them, which God had promised their great patriarch Abraham so long ago, would be given to both Jews and Gentiles who turned away from the pretense of trying to save themselves, and put their faith in Christ alone for pardon and justification.

Questions for discussion:

1. What happened when the Galatians forgot that the cross of Christ was their starting point?
2. How is Abraham a good example of salvation by grace through faith?
3. What did the Lord's death on the cross have to do with the removal of the curse of sin? Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21
4. Do earthly rulers ever take the punishment that is due to their subjects?

THE ONE OFFSPRING

To give a human example brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. [3:15]

When two or more parties come to an agreement before the law, pertaining to the sale of a piece of real estate, there is no opportunity for one of the parties to back out of the agreement. It has been sign, sealed, and delivered.

It is so with the covenant made at Sinai. But in the Old Testament era there were several types of covenant agreements having very distinct characteristics.

One of those was called the Royal Grant covenant. A monarch, wishing to bestow a province or even a kingdom on a vassal, would publish a covenant which was essentially without condition. It was a grant or promise to transfer ownership of the designated region from the present sovereign to the new owner who now had the eye of the king. The covenant that the Lord had made with Abraham was something like that. The Lord had promised to give certain blessings to Abraham and to his seed. And if human beings cannot break the terms of a covenant without consequence, then surely the Lord, who never breaks his word, would not change his mind, and thus fail to keep the promise which he had made.

Christ the one Offspring

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. [3:16]

This is an interpretation of the promise which could only have been clearly seen given the fuller revelation of the New Covenant. When God spoke to Abraham about his seed or offspring, he spoke of a singular "offspring." Paul reveals that the Lord was speaking about the Messiah. All of the promised blessings which God had made to Abraham so long ago were the promised possession of the "anointed one" who was to come, Jesus Christ. The covenant made with Abraham was eschatological in character. It would only find fulfillment in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. But no other covenant agreement made between God and mankind could annul it. The Lord had made a promise that he was sure to keep.

This is what I mean: The law, which came 430 years afterward, does not

annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise. [3:17-18]

The Hebrews were well aware of the nature of the covenant made with Abraham. God had promised to do certain things and there was no indication that the fulfillment of those promises had anything to do with man's work, or ability, or righteousness. But they had often confused the covenant made with Israel at Sinai with the Abrahamic covenant. At Sinai the Lord had given them specific laws to keep, and warned them of specific judgements that would come if they were not obeyed. It was a conditional covenant. If men and women disobeyed they would bring themselves under the judgement of the law.

Paul wants us to see the difference and to remember that what we have in Christ is not the result of law keeping, but is the outworking of what God had promised to do for his "offspring" long ago. Christ would inherit the blessings that were promised, and those blessings would belong in turn to all who were "in Christ."

The gospel is this: what God promised to Abraham has come to pass in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It has nothing to do with our faithfulness in keeping the laws of God. The question then arises, "if that is so then why was the law ever given at all?"

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one. [3:19-20]

The covenant made with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai was an agreement between two parties, God and Israel. That covenant had a mediator (Moses) who was a foreshadowing of the one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. The law was conditional. The blessings of God would belong to Israel as long as she obeyed the laws of God. Faithlessness would break the covenant and bring God's judgement on the nation.

The new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ was not like that at all. When the apostle states rather tersely that "God is one," he is reminding the Galatians that the new covenant does not depend on the faithfulness of the believer for its effect. It calls for us to be faithful, but our faithfulness is not its foundation. The new covenant is the gracious work of God. The Father planned our salvation in eternity, the Son secured it by his death on the cross, and

now the Holy Spirit applies it to our hearts.

Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. [3:21]

A listener hearing Paul's letter read in the churches of Galatia might have come to the conclusion that the apostle was arguing for the promises of God as something very good, and against the law as something very bad. Not so, says Paul. God gave his promise of blessing and salvation long ago and then later spoke the law. The law was given by God and is therefore a blessing from God. But the law and the promise had different purposes. The promise spoke of what God would do one day to salvage mankind from the results of the fall. The law could only show human beings their sin. It was never designed to save, though it serves as a part of God's saving plan. What was the purpose of the law? Paul uses the penal system to illustrate.

But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. [3:22-27]

The law is used by the Lord to hem us in. We are guided by the realization that we are sinners who have transgressed the holy laws of God. And there is a goal that the Lord has in mind. It is not that we must be restrained without any further purpose. It is not that the Lord merely intends to keep us from doing any more wickedness than we might by making us prisoners of the law. No, he uses the law as a schoolmaster, or tutor, to show us the reality and the consequence of our sins. And in doing this he brings us to see that our only hope for salvation is in Christ. The law was not designed by man for self-improvement. It was a very great gift of God to undeserving sinners. The law came into the world because of God's grace. But the very design of the law means that it was never intended to be used as a means of salvation. The law was to point us to Christ, even more, to bring us to Christ like children who are led to the truth by a wise and loving teacher. And once we have come to faith in Christ we are no longer under that tutelage. Now we are taught by Christ himself. He is our shepherd. We are no

longer mere students in need of being introduced to a better schoolmaster, now we are “sons” of God through Christ our savior.

It is not by keeping the commandments of God that we become the children of God. That can only come about by faith in Christ. We have no righteousness of our own that is acceptable before God. But Christ does. He is perfectly righteous. We look to him and find in him a perfection that we could never have unless it was given to us. We have been baptized into Christ. The water of baptism is an outward sign of the work of God in our hearts. The Holy Spirit has “baptized” us into Christ. (1 Corinthians 12:13)

This operation of the Spirit of God has taken away our sins. They have been put off like a garment that is cast aside, and we have put on the new garment of Christ’s righteousness.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.
[3:26-29]

Paul knew that much of the confusion about the way of salvation came because of the teaching of many Jews concerning what they regarded as their superior standing before God, because of their racial identity. That could not be true given the nature of salvation. We have no innate worthiness. The Jew stands on the same ground as the Gentile though he had many more blessings from God. (Romans 9:1-5)

There are no economic or social distinctions that the Lord must regard. There is no slave or free in Christ. Gender is no guarantee of acceptance with God. There is no male or female in Christ. There is only the one characterization that we all share. We are all found to be sinners. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. We come to Christ without a legitimate plea to make. Our case is decided. We have been pronounced guilty and condemned to die an eternal death.

But now all things are new in Christ. Now we are no longer to be regarded as sinners who need the tutelage of the law to keep us from blindly stumbling about without ever finding salvation. Now we have come to Christ and all earthly distinctions fade away. We have been saved by his grace. Now we can see that what was done for us was done by God. We made no contribution whatsoever!

Our true identity is made clear in that we are called “Abraham’s offspring.” Paul argues that the true “Jews” are those who are spiritually circumcised. (Romans 2:29) God indeed has a chosen people but they are not recognized by their race

or nation. They are the children of God by faith in Jesus Christ, the true son of God. They are the true seed of Abraham.

Questions for discussion:

1. How sure is God to keep the promises made by his covenant?
2. Was the covenant made with Abraham a covenant of grace or of works?
3. What was the principle use of the law with regard to our sins?
4. Are you in any sense an heir of Abraham?
5. Does socio-economic standing have anything to do with our salvation in Christ?

7

SONS OF GOD

I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. [4:1-3]

What is the difference between a slave and an heir? If those under a trusteeship are, at least for the time being, no better off than slaves, then what is their advantage? The answer lies in the passage of time.

When I was a high school student, a friend of mine told me that he had a inheritance coming to him, which had been left to him by a childless uncle. He was the uncle's namesake and was to receive a tidy little sum.

The problem, as my friend saw it, was that the uncle had made a very "unwise" stipulation in his will that the money was to lie, in trust, until the heir had reached the age of twenty-seven. To make matters worse, he had made another uncle, who had a reputation for being very "thrifty," the executor of the will. The hope of receiving and using any of, what was at the time, about thirty thousand dollars, was beyond possibility! And when you are in high school the age of twenty seven seems as far away as one's dotage!

The time did come, of course, when my friend was able to claim his inheritance and use it for whatever purpose he chose. But until that time he was as penniless as the rest of us. Well, almost. He happened to have an indulgent aunt who kept him in pocket change!

The condition of believers in the Old Testament is likened by the apostle to just such circumstances. Those who came to faith in the Lord were genuine heirs. They were not slaves. But their situation was a bit like that of slaves.

They were in slavery under the "basic principles of the world." It may be that Paul is not only speaking of Jews, under the elementary form of their religion as given to them in the law of Moses, but also of the Gentile world which had various religious convictions and various systems of morality. The law of God was a true system of morality. And even the pagan religions contained some truth.

But the full "inheritance" was not yet to be enjoyed. Old Testament saints, like David, had faith in God that he would one day provide for their salvation.

David could pray "restore to me the joy of your salvation." David was not without joy in the Lord. But compared to the knowledge that you and I have in knowing

what God has done for us in Christ, that joy was the joy of a slave and not that of one who had come into his own. When would that time come?

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba, Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. [4:4-7]

The Christian faith is an end-time faith. This does not mean that everything is related essentially to the second coming of Christ, but that the first coming of the Lord is the great watershed event in the history of the world. Everything that came before was looking forward to what the Messiah would one day accomplish for undeserving sinners. When the Old Testament prophets spoke about the end time, and the mercy and judgement of God coming at that time, they were looking forward to the first appearance of the Lord. And finally, at just the right time, he came.

It was only when "the fullness of time had come" that the Lord appeared. God, in his infinite wisdom, had planned for the Holy Spirit to overshadow Mary, a virgin girl from Palestine. The babe that would be born to her would arrive at just the right time. And his life and death and resurrection from the dead would change everything. Now all those who had been chosen in him would receive their inheritance.

To prove that this would be so, the very Spirit of God would be sent into their hearts. Before that time men and women knew God as their Father, but their experience and knowledge was like that of a son or daughter under tutelage. They had no more real freedom than slaves in the household.

Then Christ came. Now freedom and blessing had come into the world with a fulness that was never experienced before. Paul spoke of this "fulness," that can only come to us through Christ, when he wrote to the Colossians. *For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. (Colossians 2:9-10)*

Because of this they would now cry out to their Father using a very close term of endearment, "Abba." Now they would not think of God as one who was primarily a lawgiver, but as a kind and generous father who had arranged for them to receive the blessings that can only be given, not earned. The day of partial blessing was over, now the great day of inheritance had come. It is true that we are waiting for the complete unveiling of all that is in Christ. There will be a second coming of our Lord. But all that will be seen then is now given to those who put their

faith in Christ. It is a “foretaste” of things to come, that goes beyond anything that came before. This is so because it was on the cross that Christ Jesus won our inheritance.

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those who by nature are not gods. [4:8]

The Galatians were not Jews, but their situation was similar to the legalists among the Jews. They were not living up to what had been revealed to them in Christ Jesus. When they were not Christians, they worshiped a variety of gods. This paganism enslaved them. They were actually the puppets of evil spirits who stood behind the worship of the various idols before which the Galatians offered their adoration. The kingdom of darkness was ruling over them. But, when they came to know Jesus Christ and the salvation that is to be found in him, they were set free from this pitiful slavery. To know Christ is to know the truth and to know the truth is to be set free. The problem which Paul had to address was the clear inconsistency of their state of freedom in Christ, and their behavior. They were acting like people who had not been delivered. They were trying to exchange one sort of slavery for another, in this case the bondage of righteousness by works.

But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain. [4:9-11]

Notice Paul’s priority. The Galatians had come to know God through Christ. But the great defining truth is that this did not happen because of their endeavor. God had done the work. God had chosen them in eternity, sent the Savior to die for them in history, and sent forth the Holy Spirit to convict them of their sins, and give them new birth. God had done all of this for them, and he deserved all the credit for their deliverance.

But now the Galatians were acting as if they had at least cooperated with God in achieving their salvation. And they were acting as if the sustenance of their relationship with God, depended on them and their good works.

Paul warned the Colossians about this kind of religion. He told them that the condemnation of the law had been removed by the cross of Christ, and that even the unseen powers and authorities which had enslaved them had been dealt a death blow by Christ. The cross was the victory of God over the demonic world.

Therefore they were not to make the essence of their faith a matter of religious ritual observed for the purpose of securing the favor of God. (Colossians 2:16-17) And, they were to reject the mysticism which was so common among the pagans. (Colossians 2:18-19). Then using language that is similar to that of this passage in Galatians, the apostle warned them about legalistic rules and regulations as the essence of one's worship. (Colossians 2:20-23)

The Galatians were not only observing special days, they had extended these "holy obligations" to whole months of the year, and even entire years. Such observances in the name of securing the favor of God had caused Paul to fear that the very clear and powerful preaching of gospel truth which he had personally done in the hearing of the Galatians, was wasted effort on his part. But he was not ready to give up quite yet! He would try to get the Galatians to see the light.

Question for discussion:

1. Was the experience of Old Testament saints as full of blessing as that of those who live on this side of the cross?
2. Why can religious rituals be dangerous? Cf. Colossians 2:16-17
3. Why is mysticism a danger? Cf. Colossians 2:18-19
4. Why is asceticism dangerous? Cf. Colossians 2:20-23
5. Do people today place too much emphasis on special "holy" days?

A VERY PERSONAL PLEA

Brothers I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong. You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you

did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.
[4:12-14]

How could Paul tell these misguided people that they had done him no wrong? Had they not departed from the faith in great measure? Was this not a personal rejection of Paul? After all it was Paul himself who had preached the truths of the gospel to them. Indeed they now had rejected the message, and in rejecting it had wronged the messenger.

Paul was looking back to his first encounter with them. On that occasion when they had just been delivered from the bondage of sin and the darkness of Satan, they had behaved in ways that were more consistent with the light of Christ.

Now they knew Christ and were behaving in ways that were totally inconsistent with the gospel.

Is this not often true of believers? Having come to know Christ we are full of great joy and enthusiasm for the gospel and for the implications of the gospel. Then, after a period of time, we begin to grow cold. We fail to live a life that is Christ honoring, and often fall into patterns of thought and action that are simply not "Christian." All this is done, without a second thought, until someone is raised up by the Lord to help us see the error of our ways. In this case it would be the same apostle who had called the Galatians to Christ, who would be used by God to call them back to him.

Loss of joy

Paul, in an effort to call the Galatians to their senses, appeals to their memory of what had happened when first they met. The Galatians had demonstrated a very different attitude on that occasion.

What then has become of the blessing you felt? [3:15a]

There are many difficulties that may come into the lives of believers. This may happen because of their service to Christ. Opposition and persecution is the lot of many. Or trouble may come as the result of the Lord's providence.

He knows what is needed to advance his kingdom, and what he needs to do to further our sanctification. The Christian life is not trouble free.

There is a joy that should distinguish Christians from the people of this world. God's common grace brings a kind of joy in what he provides for all mankind. (Acts 14:17) But there is special blessing that is felt in knowing Christ. The Philippian jailer was filled with joy because he had come to Christ. (Acts 16:34)

This initial joy may wane, but it can be the usual experience of Christians if they do not frustrate it by false doctrine and practice. Paul commanded the Philippians to “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4) John the apostle meditated on the incarnation of Christ and on his first hand experience of the incarnate Christ in 1 John 1:1-4. He then informed his readers that his purpose in writing these things to them was to make their mutual joy complete. Redemption brings joy!

In this case it was legalism that had robbed the Galatians of the blessing of joy that should have continued in their hearts. The grace that comes by faith brings joy to those who recognize how much God has forgiven. The grace that comes by faith brings joy to those who see how much God is presently doing for them. But a religion of works righteousness saddles the believer with a heavy burden. He groans under all of the legalistic rules and regulations that he must keep in order to try to win God’s favor and maintain it.

Quite often, in Christian churches, there are artificial efforts to generate joy. Those efforts ought to be exposed for what they are. I have noticed over the years that when sadness begins to enter the heart (for whatever reason) the best antidote to that sadness is the gospel of Christ.

Like John we should think back to his incarnation, to his perfect life lived among us, and to the perfection of his sacrifice. We should remember the cross. We should meditate on the truth of his resurrection from the dead. And we should remember that it was what the Lord Jesus Christ accomplished by these works that has brought us the grace of God. To do so takes the focus off ourselves and places it where it belongs, on Christ.

The result is that our hearts will begin to stir with new adoration. Our spirits are cheered as we think on the greatness of our God, and the thought of his undeserved love fills our hearts with new joy. As long as a Christian tries to place himself under a system of works, and in that way denies the essence of the faith which is grace, he cannot be truly happy.

Loss of compassion

For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? [3:15b-16]

Paul also reminded them that they once also had a very different attitude toward others, including him. They were once full of loving compassion. This attitude toward Paul apparently was manifested in expressions of concern on account

of his bad eyesight. Had it been possible, the apostle believed, the Galatians would have torn their eyes out and shared them with their needy spiritual benefactor.

But now their attitude had changed. The indications now were that they regarded Paul as their enemy. How could this be? What had changed?

The fickle character of so many people is always one of the most disappointing aspects of being a preacher. Paul had merely preached the truth to them. But it is the preaching of the truth that annoys many Christians. When they have come to embrace a false doctrine or practice, the last thing they want to hear is the truth. They may not say it directly, but the essence of the matter is that they really don't care what the Bible teaches about the issues involved. They are convinced that they are right and are unwilling to change. Those, who in love, try to convince them otherwise, are treated as enemies.

The quality of enthusiasm is determined by the cause

They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose and not only when I am present with you, my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you. [4:17-20]

The false teaching of the legalists had behind it the desire of the false teachers to feather their own nests. They had an agenda. Their goal was to convince the Galatians that Paul did not know what he was talking about. They wanted to use their doctrine as a wedge to separate the Galatians from Paul, and insure that the Galatians would redirect time, money, and energies to the cause of the legalists.

Lest the Galatians misunderstand (they had managed to misunderstand so much already) the apostle explained that the obvious zeal of the circumcision party was not in and of itself the problem. There is a tendency on the part of many to regard extraordinary energy poured out on behalf of a cause as the habit of an extremist. But Paul did not fault his enemies concerning their enthusiasm for their cause. He faults them for their motives and their false doctrine.

This was not an unbiblical judgement by Paul. He was not passing judgement in a way that contradicts the teaching of our Lord. (cf. Matthew 7:1-2) The teaching and the intentions of the circumcision party were well known. It had become a matter of trying to persuade the Galatians of their error in being willing to entertain the legitimacy of those teachings.

To be zealous is not a bad thing if it is for the cause of God and truth. And, because Paul is well aware of the fickle character of these young believers, he cautioned them that if they were to whip themselves into a frenzy for the truth for a few days, perhaps the times when he or other leaders in the church were present with them, but fail to keep up that intensity of commitment, the result would be a sad one.

Paul's concern for his children

The expression which the apostle used here is not one that commonly appears in the writings of Paul. He called these deceived Galatians his "children." He loved them as a father loves his own child. No good and loving father would allow his own children to race to the edge of a cliff and plunge headlong to destruction below.

Paul cannot stand by and look on while the Galatian Christians race to the edge of a theological precipice. He will do all that he can do to keep them from casting themselves over the edge and into a destructive heresy!

He is perplexed, wondering how best to keep them from destroying themselves. His desire for them has always been to see the Lord Jesus Christ perfectly formed in them. There was always the possibility that they would turn out to be mere nominal professors of Christ. But Paul still hopes that in the end they will reveal that they are true servants of Christ. They would prove themselves to be so, by moving from their childish ways to a mature understanding of the gospel and all of its implications. They would forsake the present error and turn back to the truth that they had first received. Then, and only then, would they grow to be what a Christian is supposed to be.

Questions for discussion:

1. What was Paul's state of health when first he came to the Galatians?
2. It is unusual for a Christian to begin with joy and enthusiasm only to grow cold?
3. Why is legalism so lacking in joy?
4. Is sheer enthusiasm always a good thing or should it be judged by another standard?
5. Do you think that true pastors like Paul always grieve over the errors of those whom they have taught the word of God?

HAGAR AND SARAH

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. [4:23]

Paul's perplexity about how best to approach this problem is resolved by an appeal to Scripture itself. The Galatians claimed to be following "teachers of the law." "Very well," Paul says, "to the law and to the testimony." His technique is one that every teacher of truth ought to follow. Test everything by the written word of God. In order to do that, Paul reminds them of the truth that more than one person was considered a "son" of Abraham. The experience and the standing of the two sons differed greatly. The one son (Ishmael) was the product of a natural course of events. Sarah, unwisely, offered her handmaiden to her husband Abraham in the hope of having a "son" of her "own." Sarah, convinced that she was too old to have children, was willing to settle for second best. And Abraham was easily convinced. Ishmael, a child born in the most natural fashion, was the result.

But Isaac, who was born later, by the grace of God, was a child of promise. God had told both Abraham and Sarah that they would have such a son. And in due time, God kept his word to them. But the whole matter was very "unnatural." Abraham was quite old, we might say even "ancient," and so was Sarah. Sarah was well past the age of child bearing. Still, they had a child because of the promise of God.

Spiritual Slavery under the Law

Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these woman 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. [4:24-25]

The law of God is good and holy, but it was never intended to be a means of salvation. The law was given to bring conviction of sin. The law was to set before the people of Israel a standard of righteousness that reflected the holiness of God himself. They were, by the law, to be enabled to see just how serious their sins were, and the hope was that they would then cast themselves upon the mercy of God.

In fact, what many had done was to pervert the holy law of God by trying to use it as a vehicle for salvation. They preached the law as the way to God. Keep these commandments and you will demonstrate the integrity that you have within you. Keep these commandments and you will show to both God and man that you deserve to have the blessings of God now, and heaven in the hereafter.

But Paul will have none of this. The apostle insists that such thinking

is sure to lead to a horrible condition of slavery. We already lie spiritually dead in trespasses and sins. We are already in spiritual chains because we have sinned against God and because we inherit a condition from Adam, our common forefather, that predisposes us to sin. We may think that we can show God just how good we are, but that is folly. We can never hope to be perfect and that is precisely what God requires. To think otherwise only aggravates an already bad situation. It enslaves us completely!

Spiritual Freedom and the Promise

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 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. [4:26-31]

The Christian, that is the true Christian who has been born again by the work of God’s Spirit, is a child of the promise. He or she lay dead in sin. God came to us and we were born again, not by any natural means but by a miracle of God’s grace. We were dead and could do nothing to help ourselves. The Lord had to intervene and it took nothing less than an unseen miracle to impart new life to us. Only God could have done that, just as only God could have enabled Abraham and Sarah to have an child when they were beyond the age of child bearing. (Cf. Romans 4:13-25)

The religion of this world is a religion of works righteousness. Men are convinced that they do not need God’s intervention. They are certain that they are essentially good. They just need a proper forum to show the world the goodness of their hearts, and the way that goodness is worked out in their lives. Men and women, in various ways, seek to justify themselves before man and God. When a preacher appears who proclaims the sinfulness of men and women and the need to repent and find a righteousness in Christ that will justify before God, they

are ignored at best and persecuted at worst. But God will not have people to worship him who try to come before him by their own efforts. He will receive sinners and only sinners who repent. And it is those sinners who find grace at the hands of God that are truly free. The Lord Jesus Christ said that to know the truth is to be made free.

Paul reasons that this should not surprise us given the biblical (Old Testament) teaching concerning freedom. Quoting from a passage that reveals the inclusive love of God and his purpose to expand his kingdom (Isaiah 54:1), he speaks of the heavenly Jerusalem. For Paul, the earthly Jerusalem lies in the bondage of works righteousness.

But there is a “heavenly Jerusalem,” the true city and dwelling place of God. Our citizenship is there. And the spiritual principles of the heavenly Jerusalem govern our thinking and practice. Freedom from sin and the forces of evil are ours in Christ. The heavy burden of the law as it stands against us and points out our sins has been removed by the cross of Christ. We have been set free.

The writer of Hebrews contrasts Sinai and the heavenly Jerusalem in Hebrews 12:18-29. He reminds us that the appearance of God at Sinai was terrifying, but he also reminds us that we have come to the true Jerusalem where angels are festive in their praise of God. We have come especially to Jesus who is the mediator of a new covenant, a covenant that far surpasses the old in its importance and benefits.

Again, the apostle turns back to the illustration of Hagar and Sarah. Isaac was a child of promise, a child of grace not human ability. The slave woman’s son was not allowed to share in the inheritance that belonged to the child of promise and grace.

We, Paul says, have an inheritance in Christ. We are the children of freedom, not slavery. To add anything to the gospel of freedom in Christ would be to destroy the effect of the gospel itself. With this in mind Paul will set out in some detail the truths of freedom as they relate to the believer.

Questions for discussion:

1. Did the apostle Paul regard the Old Testament as scripture?
2. Who does Hagar represent?
3. Who does Sarah represent?
4. Which of the two corresponds to the Christian who has been set free by Christ?

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TAKING A STAND FOR FREEDOM

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. [5:1]

Christians must be understood to be the only truly free people in the world. They are free from guilt. The Lord Jesus Christ has, by his death, made a way for the ungodly to be pardoned all their transgressions against God. He has taken the punishment due them upon himself, and now speaks a word of forgiveness to all who repent.

Christians are also free from the condemnation of the law. God's law exposed our sins but now they have been dealt with by Christ "who became sin for us." We no longer should fear that God's wrath will fall upon us for transgressions

of his law. Christ has borne all that, by his death on the cross.

And, Christians are free from the bondage of their wills. We lay dead in our transgressions and sins. We were without hope, completely unable to help ourselves until the Lord came with reviving power. The Holy Spirit of God brought to us the benefits of Christ's atoning work, and we were in that way touched by the regenerating hand of God. We were in slavery to spiritual death, to the world and its ways, to Satan and the kingdom of darkness, and to the inclinations of our own flesh. But now we have been set free from those powers that held us fast.

The issue which remains is this, will we live as free men and women or will we allow ourselves to be put back into slavery to live our lives with great and heavy burdens that the Lord has not ordained for us. And, Paul argues, that is not all.

Look: I, Paul say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. [5:2-4]

Paul now makes clear the uncompromising position that he has taken. To be circumcised would be to acknowledge that true faith in Christ is absent. Those who have come to depend on Christ alone for salvation should resist every effort to make something else the object of their faith. They should know that they have received mercy in Christ. They should not trust in any other thing or any other "savior."

The sad truth is that those who depend on Christ, plus anything else, have come short of the grace of God. They cannot be saved, because salvation is a matter of trust in Christ alone. Paul asserts that the Galatians had fallen away from grace.

Occasionally one will hear someone ask, "Do you believe that a person can fall from grace?" The popular understanding of that phrase is this. "Falling from grace" means to be saved, and then to lose salvation. Can a person who is truly saved ever be lost again? The answer to that question is "No!" Once a person has come to know Christ the Bible teaches that they can never fall from their secure position in him. Our salvation is not dependent on our efforts for sustenance. To believe otherwise is to miss one of the basic truths that the apostle Paul is setting before us in this epistle. Salvation, Paul says, is a matter of grace. It is what God does for us that saves, not what we do for God.

So what does Paul mean by "fallen away from grace?"

The Judaizers, who taught that one must believe in Christ but must also

be circumcised and keep the law in order to be saved, had fallen away from a doctrine of salvation that held up Christ as our only hope. They had fallen away, or fallen short of grace teaching, and were teaching a doctrine that was not Christian. The heart of the gospel is the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. They were “reaching up” toward the truth revealed in Christ, and even acknowledging that without him there would be no salvation. But they then destroyed the truth of salvation by Christ, of salvation by grace. They did this by adding other conditions to the responsibility of sinners, which is to place faith in Christ. To “fall from grace” is to turn away from the sufficiency of Christ alone for salvation, and to turn grace into a matter of pride filled works.

Our hope for righteousness

For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. [5:5-6]

Paul is now back to his constant theme. There is a righteousness that has come down to men from God. Jesus Christ is the only person who exemplifies this righteousness of God in perfection. He is the righteousness of God. We have received him as our Lord and Savior but we have not been perfected yet. We must wait until Christ is revealed at his second coming before all that God has in store for us will be ours. The full benefit of justification by faith comes when Christ returns. We are freed from sin and temptation when we go to be with the Lord at death. That state is better by far than what we now experience. (Philippians 1:23) Those who are with the Lord may be described as “the spirits of the righteous made perfect.” (Hebrews 12:23b) The experience of spiritual perfection that they have now is one that came to them by the imputed righteousness of Christ.

But there is a greater “perfection” still to come at the return of our Lord. The dead will be raised incorruptible, and all will be made new. We will have a bodily existence for all eternity. We will then know what it means to live without sin or any other imperfection. All will be flawless, and full of the beauty and glory of God.

We hope and wait for the righteousness of God to be revealed perfectly in our own lives. Outward visible signs such as circumcision are not understood to have any saving grace. Even baptism, though it is full of grace and proclaims grace as the way of salvation, has no saving efficacy in and of itself. What counts is “faith working through love.”

It is faith in Christ alone that saves. And if that faith is real, it will be manifested to the world as love. The faith that our Lord Jesus Christ had placed in his Father above was demonstrated to be true by his willingness to die in our place on the cross. Had he resisted the will of God, we should have concluded that he was not the true Messiah. But he did obey and persevered all the way to his death on the cross.

Such love is not mere emotion. It is not a warm feeling toward someone. It goes the distance. It is willing to sacrifice self for the good of others. This is the true sign, Paul says, of a Christian.

No physical sign can convey the truths that flow from the grace of God. But love is one sign of true salvation that others can see. Peter even tells wives with unbelieving husbands that though they may not be won to faith in Christ by words (they had already heard the word and rejected it) they may yet come to see the truth as it is revealed in the purity and reverence of the wife's life. (1 Peter 3:1-2)

We see the same pattern in the well known passage from Ephesians: *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this not your doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.* (Ephesians 2:8-10)

The grace of God is seen as operative in us. We are God's workmanship. It is not our work that will be offered to the Lord for his inspection and our salvation. He will never be found saying "you have done enough for me, now enter into heaven." Grace is what he does for us. Grace is God's gift based on God's work. And, it is true that if that grace is really ours, we will see it blossoming forth into a bouquet of good works. These works of love will give evidence that our salvation is real. We are saved by grace. It is by faith that we receive this gift of God. But faith is a gift as well. It is part of the grace of God.

And love for the Lord and for one another will be seen because these good works are wrought by the Lord, in and through us. God's grace so changes sinners' hearts that they now love him, and love other people as well.

Resist false teaching even when it seems insignificant

You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you. "A little leaven leavens the whole lump." I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. [5:7-10]

The Christian life is hardly a smooth ascent to higher levels of understanding and practice. Just when things seem to be going well, it seems that Satan attacks and often has some success in diverting us from truth and from proper obedience to the Lord.

One of the most noteworthy demonstrations of God's power in the life of one of his servants is recorded in 1 Kings 18. The prophet Elijah challenged King Ahab to bring the false prophets of Baal to Mount Carmel for a "showdown."

Elijah bravely confronted the king and the people. "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him."

Two altars were prepared and bullocks placed on them. Elijah told the prophets of Baal to call on the name of their God and he would call on his God, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob. He told them, "the god who answers by fire, he is God." (1 Kings 18:24b)

All day long the prophets of Baal cried out. They even worked themselves into a great frenzy and cut themselves so that blood flowed. But Baal did not answer.

Elijah commanded that the altar be saturated with water. It would be a clear demonstration of God's power. Then Elijah called on the true God of heaven.

Fire came down and consumed the sacrifice on the altar. It was a great victory for the cause of God and truth! But when the wicked queen Jezebel heard that her prophets had failed and had been executed as false prophets by the people, she sent word to Elijah. "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." (1 Kings 19:2b)

Then, strangely enough, Elijah's courage failed and he "ran for his life." He became discouraged and called on God to take his life.

The Galatians had been "running a good race." They were growing in the knowledge of the truth as revealed in Christ. They were demonstrating love for the Lord and for their fellow man. But something had gone very wrong. Perhaps they had become a bit proud. Perhaps they had come to think of *day to day* obedience to the truth as *boring*.

Whatever the reason, they were now seeking novel teachings, and were being led away from the truth down the pathway of legalistic religion. They had allowed someone to "cut in on them." If this course of action was pursued they would not win the race, they would not even finish the race. At the first it had been just a "little" yeast that had been added to their faith in Christ. It would seem that the false teachers had started small. They had fed the Galatians a little false doctrine here and there. But even a little yeast works its way through the loaf and changes the character of one's faith.

What they needed was to return to the old paths. They needed to remember that salvation is by grace alone and that their lives must conform to that truth. Anything else would lead to spiritual disaster. And so the apostle reminded them that he had not preached “circumcision,” and that he was not presently doing so.

But if I brothers, sill preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. [5:11]

Lest the Galatian Christians should somehow think otherwise, Paul wanted them to be clear on his position. He preached Christ as the only way of salvation, plus nothing. He would not add anything to this bedrock truth! The gospel has in it a tendency to offend the sensibilities of this world. Its message of grace, which of necessity demonstrates the inability and sinfulness of men and women, is not agreeable to the people of this world. They are convinced of their worthiness and spiritual ability. They have no sense of their need for God or the vastness of that need.

Therefore, to preach salvation by the works of man, even in part, is to fashion a false gospel that appeals to man’s sinful heart. Such a gospel will be dismissed as inoffensive. But the truth revealed in our Lord Jesus Christ will always be offensive to the unregenerate mind.

I once received an advertisement for a “Christian” children’s event. A slogan which was highlighted on the poster stated, “I believe in God, God believes in me!” What a misguided thing to use as the theme for a children’s camp! I thank the Lord that he did not allow me to have teachers as a child who told me that God “believes” in me. Now it is very obvious that such sentiments come, not from the Bible, but from the contemporary emphasis on self-worth and self esteem. When I called and asked about the origin of the slogan, I was told that it was not “biblical” but that the editors had not seen it as wrong in anyway. That is very distressing! To suggest that we believe in God and he believes in us, is to imply that we are in a cooperative venture with God. We acknowledge him and he in turn affirms us, and we sail along together on the sea of mutual respect doing all sorts of good things.

But the Bible teaches us that we have all gone astray. Not only does the Lord not believe in us, he condemns us for our sins. Not only are we *not* in the position of contributing anything to our relationship to God, we are found to be without a relationship to him.

The poster that I was sent reflects a point of view that is essentially the same as the Galatian heresy. The Galatians thought of themselves as

cooperating with God to achieve salvation. And they, like all legalists, thought of God as approving of their efforts to demonstrate their ability and obedience by being circumcised.

Such sentiments do not offend the world. They only offend those who love the gospel of God's grace to undeserving sinners. What troubles me most is that there are so many "Christian" people in our day who do not seem to have a problem with such heterodox statements. Either they are not *thinking*, and we have been commanded to love the Lord with all our minds, or they really do not believe that such a viewpoint contradicts their faith. Can they really be Christian in any biblical sense of the word?

I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves! [5:12]

It is in this passage that Paul's passion for the truth glows with evangelical ardor. Like so many Christians of my age, I grew up reading the King James translation of the scriptures. That translation puts verse twelve this way, "I would they were even cut off which trouble you." To my childish ears it sounded as if Paul was simply saying that he wished that the false teachers would disappear.

However, when I was in the army, a friend who was serving with me gave me an interlinear Greek-English New Testament. After reading the passage with that help, I realized that Paul was probably being sarcastic toward these false teachers.

When I later studied Greek, that realization was demonstrated to be true. Since these false teachers were demanding physical mutilation as a way of salvation, he wished that they would show how really "spiritual" they were, by going the whole way. They would not only circumcise themselves, but like some of the priests of various pagan religions, they could emasculate themselves and show just how really good they were!

Question for discussion:

1. What specifically are Christians set free from?
2. What does Paul mean when he tells the Galatians that they have fallen away from grace?
3. How does true faith in Christ manifest itself to the people of this world?
4. How does Elijah provide an example of our potential for inconsistency?
5. Why did Paul say that he hoped that the false teachers would emasculate themselves?

THE PROPER USE OF FREEDOM

Paul has argued that to add anything to faith in Christ as a condition for salvation is to put oneself back into spiritual slavery. Without Christ, human beings, though they seldom realize it, are in bondage to Satan and the forces of spiritual darkness, to this world and all of its allurements, both material and philosophical, and to our own fallen nature which we have inherited from Adam our common forefather.

And since this is our lost condition, the apostle reminds professing Christians who seem to be “captivated” by a false gospel of works, that to embrace anyone or anything as equal with Christ, or as something to be added to Christ for salvation, is to deny the calling of the Lord. He has called us to freedom not slavery. Can you imagine what the apostle Paul would have said in response to the notion that Mary is a “co-redeemer” with Christ! Such slavery cannot be condoned in the life of a true believer.

For you were called to freedom, brothers. [5:13a]

When the Lord applies the benefits of his death and resurrection to our lives by the work of the Holy Spirit, he breaks the bonds of the world, the flesh, and the devil. He sets us free from all the enemies of God and man. Those enemies were all defeated by the cross, and will be destroyed in a final display of the glories of Christ’s victory when he comes again.

Christian freedom is to be used to serve God and mankind

Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. [5:13b]

For the present age, we are to live as free men and women. We are to use

our liberty to serve God and to advance his purposes. Many people in our day define freedom as the right to do anything you choose to do, or as the right to behave in a self-directed way, free from domination of any kind. But the Bible defines freedom in a very different way.

We are to use our newfound liberty in Christ to become servants. This, of course, is a paradox. We were servants to sin and death, to Satan and hell, to the flesh and to the world. But the Lord broke those chains and set us free.

Paradoxically, we now willingly use our freedom to become servants again. But this time we will not serve our old masters. We will only serve God!

Christian freedom is harmonious with the law of God

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. [5:14-15]

The Lord Jesus Christ taught that to love God and to love one's neighbor as oneself is to fulfill the law. The first table of the law (the first four commandments) teach us our duty to God. The second table of the law (the remaining commandments) teach us our duty to our fellow man. In this passage Paul asserts that to keep the second table of the law sums up the whole.

His point is that one who loves and serves one's fellows, loves God. Only those who truly love the Lord will truly love and serve others, with purity of motive. To "bite and devour" one's fellows is to practice destructive behavior not only towards them but towards oneself. In the end it is those who behave in such a way who will be revealed to be false professors of Christ. Christian liberty is not freedom to indulge oneself; it is freedom to love God and others for the right reason.

No doubt Paul had in mind the character of legalism. When people think that they are earning a high standing with God because of who they are, or because of what they do, they soon tend to become very critical of others. They hardly ever have anything good to say about others. They only seek to point out the shortcomings of those around them. They indulge themselves in a "feeding frenzy" with regard to both friend and foe. They are like sharks who tear the flesh of their victims.

Christian freedom is not at odds with God's leadership

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires

of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to. But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under law. [5:16-18]

To be directed by the Spirit of God is to recognize the sovereignty of the Lord as paramount in our lives. We do not become independent of all authority when we become children of the Lord. He is our Father. He is our King, our Lord.

We still have the residual problem of our flesh. We will have remaining sin until the time that the Lord comes for us, or takes us home to be with him. We also have the Holy Spirit living within. What our flesh desires is not what God desires.

To be led by the Spirit of God is to discover a new and dynamic principle at work in our hearts. We are no longer under law. When we were lost, without Christ, we were “under” the law. It was, as Paul has already shown, a servant given us by God’s grace, whose job it was to lead us to the truth of our helplessness before a holy God. The law functioned as a goad to our consciences to reveal the truth about our sinfulness. It would not leave us alone, but kept reminding us that we could not ever hope to measure up to God’s standard of righteousness.

This was our condition. We were “under” law. (3:13-15)

But now, having been saved by God’s grace, we come to see that the law functions in a different way for us. Now the law of God is our delight. Like the Psalmist we say, *With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth. In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches.* (Psalm 119:13-14)

To be led by the Spirit is not a matter of mysticism or sheer personal judgment. I once went into a shop seeking to rent a piece of equipment. The shop keeper was a Christian. When a question arose about the propriety of renting the item to me, even though he was not sure if it had been promised to someone else, he paused and said, “Well, I guess it is time for a little spiritual discernment.” He seemed to think that the Lord would simply give him an impression of which path to take. It was good that he wanted to be led by the Lord. But to be led by the Spirit is not so subjective. It means that now we love the truths of the word of God and we will willingly and freely subject ourselves to their guidance. We no longer regard God’s law as a cruel taskmaster but find the statutes of the Lord to be consistent with our new found freedom in Christ. The shopkeeper might well have remembered the word of the Lord which describes a righteous man as one, *...who swears to his own hurt and does not change.* (Psalm 15:4b)

In the last generation there have been a number of teachers who reject any notion that Christians are obligated to regard the commandments of God as normative for the Christian life. This has certainly not been the teaching of the church

through the ages. Paul was adamant concerning any attempt to establish one's own standing before God by means of law keeping. We are saved by grace. But the same apostle agreed with the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. *Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.* (Matthew 5:19) There is an objective standard of righteous behavior and it is the word of God.

Paul was delighted with the freedom that he had come to know in Christ. But he would not make the error of many of the false teachers that were arising in his day. He would not conclude that we are free to follow the desires of the flesh and believe that since our sins have been removed by Christ, we can live in a licentious way. That would have been an affront to the Savior who suffered so much as he died in our place on the cross!

Questions for discussion:

1. What is the primary use of our freedom as it relates to others?
2. Does Christian liberty release us from our obligation to love God and others?
3. What great conflict is presently going on in believers? Cf. Romans 7:7-25
4. Does God ever lead us in ways that are contrary to his word?

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. [5:19-21]

Again Paul sets a catalog of wrongdoing before us. It is a catalog of things which disagree with the holy law of God. It is a catalog of things which in the same way disagree with the perfect righteousness of our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ and with the leadership of the Holy Spirit. cf. Ephesians 5:5 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.

Sins of the flesh

These sins of the flesh seem to fall into several groups of sins. The first has to do with the use of the body. Sexual immorality, impurity and sensuality are descriptions of vices that involve the misuse of our God given bodies. Paul told the church at Corinth to run from such things. (1 Corinthians 6:18a)

In 1 Corinthians, chapter six, the apostle taught that such sins are especially troublesome because these are sins against our own bodies. All other sins are committed outside the body, but sexual sins include more than disobedience to God. Sexual sins involve the misuse of the temple of God.

We have been born again, and it was the Holy Spirit who brought the new birth to us. With that touch of God's Spirit came a permanent relationship. We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. This doctrine should not be taken lightly.

As God himself came to dwell in the midst of his people Israel in Old Testament times in an earthly sanctuary, so he comes to dwell in each of us today. When we sin against our bodies we sin against the holy presence of God, against God's very temple.

Sexual immorality

The word that is translated here as "sexual immorality" is a blanket term for any kind of illicit sexual intercourse. Paul also speaks of "impurity" and "sensuality." By impurity or "uncleanness" he means any kind of activity whether in thought or deed that may not involve the act of sexual intercourse itself, but which is impure and licentious. The term "sensuality" denotes any kind of unrestrained and illicit sensual adventure. Such things do not have any place in the life of those who have been saved by Christ.

Idolatry

Next the apostle takes up “idolatry and sorcery.” Idolatry refers to any form of dedication to someone or something that takes a higher place in our devotion than the true and living God. Idolatry was the great stumbling block for Israel in Old Testament times. Again and again the nation that was supposed to be committed only to the worship of Jehovah would follow the surrounding peoples into gross idolatry. But idolatry can be more subtle. To place anything, such as a love for sports or entertainment, in a place that belongs only to God is to become an idolater. To place anyone or any institution in the place that belongs only to God is to become an idolater.

It is quite possible to introduce “idolatrous” practices into the life and worship of the church. Moses warned the Israelites that to pattern their worship after the people of the land of Canaan would be an abomination to the Lord. (Deuteronomy 12:29-32) We are not only prohibited from bowing before other gods, we are not to try and worship the one true and living God by using the methods of this world. The reformers called this biblical principle the regulative principle. They accepted the truth, taught in the word of God, that if we cannot find a basis in the Bible for what we do we simply should not do it.

Occult beliefs and practices

Paul also mentions sorcery. When I was a young man I often took roles in various operatic productions. Occasionally we would stray from the “classics” and perform a newer work. One of these was a musical setting of a play called “The Crucible.” It was about the well known Salem “witch trials” which took place in New England in colonial days. The central point of the play was that anyone who would be concerned about witchcraft is probably an ill-tempered bigot who would love to see great numbers of people hanged or burned at the stake. After all, modern man does not believe in anything supernatural or preternatural. Witches simply did not exist.

But as the years passed by I noticed that there was a growing interest in the occult on the part of many and that this was not a “foreign” trend. Not far from where I live one can find people practicing the “dark arts.” They often claim that their purposes are benevolent and non-violent, but I have already seen a number of people brought to personal ruin, and even death, as a result of such involvement.

It seems that Satan is not very creative. He keeps bringing back the same

old devices to deceive the gullible. The dark arts are very much alive today. Christians should have nothing to do with the occult. Should a Christian consult a medium? Should a Christian seek advice for the day from the horoscope published in the newspaper? Christians are people who have the Spirit of God dwelling within and who have the word of God as our guide. There is no need for any other consultation!

When the Israelites had entered the land they were told that they would find people who burned their babies, and little children, in the fire of a pagan sacrifice. God's people were to abhor such things! Seances, fortune telling, reading omens or signs, were to be avoided like the plague. These were the things that the Canaanites did which had caused the Lord to disposses them. They were about to be brought under the judgement of God for their sins. (Deuteronomy 18:9-14)

Another group of sins follows. It is a very long list. Paul identifies "enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, and envy" as sins of the flesh.

Enmity

Both older, and more recent translations of the Bible speak of "hatred" in Galatians 5:20. It is a good translation but a more literal rendering is "enmity." The Greek work *echthra* refers to one's attitude toward an enemy. Our understanding of "hatred" might include a momentary response to provocation that would soon pass away. Perhaps the word "enmity" does not sound as harsh, but it indicates an ongoing attitude of hostility. The flesh inclines human beings to wallow in their resentments and allow themselves to hate with perseverance.

It often seems that when one finds a problem of a bad relationship within a local church between two or more people, it may be traced to offences, or perceived offenses, that actually took place long ago, sometimes many years ago. But people often refuse to let go of such things, and keep a smoldering fire of resentment in their hearts. Such attitudes never advance the cause of Christ.

Strife

The second word is "strife." The history of the world is a history of conflict. That inclination to hatred and war with others is common to all nations and cultures. Such divisions and the resultant verbal and/or physical

confrontations that result between individuals or groups of people are not things that come from the Spirit of God. Conflicts may be inevitable because of sin in the world, but we do not have to be the ones who originate them. We are new creatures in Christ and are called to live in a way that reflects the peace of God given us in Christ Jesus.

It is true that the sin that still remains in us has many manifestations. One person may find that their greatest temptation is to love a fight. If that is the case it is incumbent on them to resist that temptation by the power of the Holy Spirit. When our Lord could have called ten thousand angels to his rescue and put the human opposition to flight, he did not do so. He realized that there is a greater conflict and that it must be fought with weapons that are spiritual.

Jealousy

Another indication of fleshly activity is a spirit of jealousy. The person who follows the way of the flesh is often also one who resents the apparent advancement of others. They resent their neighbor's greater wealth. They resent their neighbor's election to a position of authority. They resent anyone who they think may direct attention away from themselves. *Bloodthirsty men hate one who is blameless and seek the life of the upright.* (Proverbs 29:10)

When the prophet Daniel was honored with a position of great power in the land of captivity, this aroused opposition from his jealous contemporaries. Realizing that Daniel was a "man of integrity," they concluded that they would not be able to find something wrong with Daniel unless it involved a conflict between the laws of God and the laws of men. Knowing him to be a worshiper of Jehovah, they played on the vanity of their oriental monarch. They easily persuaded King Darius, who was Daniel's friend, to issue a decree that for a month's time no one would be allowed to pray to any god or man, except the king himself.

Never dreaming that he was putting his friend Daniel's life in jeopardy, the king agreed. When Daniel was found praying to the Lord he was arrested and thrown into a den of lions. What would normally have been disaster was averted by the intervention of God, but it all came about because of the jealousy of evil men.

Jealousy is not an emotion that comes from the Holy Spirit.

The Lord saved Daniel from the den of lions just as he had worked in a mighty way to make certain that Joseph became the vice-regent of all Egypt. But that did not excuse the behavior of Joseph's brothers. They had been so full of jealousy toward their brother that they were willing to sell him into bondage. Such attitudes and such behavior are very displeasing to God.

Fits of anger

Paul goes on to speak of the unbridled venting of one's anger. *A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back.* (Proverbs 29:11)

How many lives have been ruined and how many families have been destroyed by a single act of violence that came from unrestrained rage? Because a blow was struck in a moment of anger, or because a word was spoken by a tongue that was out of control, relationships have been destroyed that might have been productive and a blessing to both parties.

Rivalries

The list of sins that comprise Paul's catalog of the works of the flesh fall into four distinct groupings. The first has to do with sexual sinfulness, sexual immorality, impurity and sensuality. The second group is related to religion that is false, idolatry and sorcery are the categories that are mentioned.

The third group is a long list of relational failures. The last group identifies intemperance as sin, and it is drunkenness and orgies that are held before us as examples of that intemperance. The first sin to be mentioned in the group of relational sins is that of "rivalries."

The sons of Zebedee, James and John, both apostles of our Lord, came to the Lord with an interesting request. *Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.* (Mark 10:37)

Even the disciples that the Lord had called to follow him were not above maneuvering for a position of political advantage. James and John, at this point, believed that the kingdom of God was to be essentially carnal, and that they might have the opportunity to be second in command only to the Lord Jesus Christ. They could see Christ, seated upon his throne, lording it over the nations, and James and his brother John would be seated just next to him. Their prominence at court would make clear to all who saw them that they were "movers and shakers." They would have real power in the greatest kingdom that the world had ever seen.

The Lord gently rebuked them. "You don't know what you are asking," he said. The Lord Jesus then taught his disciples that to be great in the kingdom of God is to humble oneself and seek to be a servant to one's brothers and sisters in Christ.

Dissensions, divisions, and envy

Paul warned the Roman Christians, *I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out*

for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. (Romans 16:17-18)

It is a sad truth that there are often people who profess faith in Christ whose first goal seems to be to divide individual Christians from one another, and to create divisions in the church as a whole. This is done with selfish motives.

It is usually not hard to see such activity for what it is, but the apostle did go on to warn the Roman Christians to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil. This suggests that he worried about the naive response of some to such activity.

It is sad but true that many people can only see what they are doing as the thing of true importance in the life of the church. When that is combined with a conviction of their own self importance the result is division for the sake of their "cause." This is most often done by reminding others of how important their "ministry" is. In our day it is usually connected with claims of hundreds or even thousands of souls who have been saved as a result of their work. Then the end justifies the means. Monetary resources must be directed toward the "ministry" that brings justification to them for their employment, and glory for them when others begin to speak of how significant their contribution is to the kingdom of God. They give in to the temptation to denigrate others and their work. Thus they create division in the church of God. I once knew a fellow who said that his spiritual gift was to make other people angry. He was entirely serious.

There are times however, in the life of the church, when division is inevitable, in order for the people of God to be obedient to him. In recent times many denominations have been torn apart by the denial, on the part of some, of the great central verities of the faith. There are those, from time to time, who assail the truthfulness of God's word. There are those who deny the necessity of Christ's death for sinners.

There are others who have taught that human beings are not under the judgement of God and that they may improve themselves by their own endeavors. There have been those who deny the truth of Christ's return to reign in glory, and deny the reality of heaven and hell. That is when division becomes inevitable. To fail to turn aside from such teaching and practice, or to compromise with it, brings us under the chastening hand of God.

But we should come to that place of division hesitantly. We must examine all things to find out the truth. And we must not allow ourselves to be used by those who just enjoy a fight. We certainly must not be the kind of people

who enjoy starting an church feud. Our spirit should be non-combative. We must examine ourselves to see whether we are serving the kingdom of God or our own selfish motives.

And we must pray for the peace of Jerusalem. (Psalm 122:6) Are you someone who prays for the absence of unnecessary conflict in the life of the church, and in the relationships that are formed between individual Christians? Our goal must be the unity of the body of Christ. After all, it was our Lord who prayed, *...that they all may be one, just as you Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.* (John 17:21)

Following Bacchus instead of Christ

Finally, Paul warned the Galatians not to be involved with *...drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.* (5:21b)

Bacchus, or as he was sometimes called by the earlier name Dionysus, was the Greek and Roman God of wine and revelry. It has always seemed strange to me to see Victorian and Edwardian era paintings that have for their subject matter a bacchanal, a host of people, often with their clothes in disarray, prancing around in a woodland grove and drinking from large goblets. As a child I can remember seeing that sort of wall hanging in the homes of the very sedate matrons of my home town. They clearly did not seem to understand what those drawings represented.

The ancient world seemed to vacillate between asceticism (a very restrictive style of life) and all sorts of excess. Paul would have been familiar with the bulimic practices of the aristocracy in his day. It would have been impossible to keep secret that kind of behavior, especially when there were servants in attendance.

Often members of the Roman nobility, including various emperors, gave banquets where the guests were invited to gorge themselves with food. Afterward they would regurgitate what they had eaten so that they could gorge themselves once more. They drank wine to excess and committed all sorts of sexual sins while in a drunken stupor.

But this kind of behavior, to one degree or another, has not been limited to antiquity. Down through the ages such excesses have caused great problems for many. The sexual sins of the sons of Eli brought great disgrace to the house of God. (1 Samuel 2:12-26) Noah's drunken behavior was a contributing factor that led to a curse being placed on the descendants of Canaan.

When God's people give themselves to such behavior they are heaping shame

on the saving work of Christ. When God's people allow themselves to be controlled by their appetites and not by the Spirit of God, they reveal that they are being disloyal to Christ their master. The Ephesians were told, *Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery. But be filled with the Spirit.* (Ephesians 5:18)

Then, at the end of this long catalog of the various sins of the flesh, Paul gives a solemn warning. *I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.* [5:21b]

This can be understood with reference to the lost and the saved. It is not surprising that many who do not know Christ give themselves to this kind of behavior. What ought to surprise us is that they do not always do so. There are various reasons for this. One is that hypocrisy is a sin which many find useful. But there are moral standards that arise in every nation because of the consciousness of the law of God. That law remains stamped upon the soul of every human being. This is not the same thing as having the law of God in our hearts.

That condition comes to us when we are regenerated by the Spirit of God. That is a condition of the heart that comes with knowing Christ. It means that we have come to love God's law. And that brings us to Paul's point.

When someone comes to know Christ as Lord and Savior they have received the Holy Spirit, who continues to dwell in them. This does not mean that they cannot sin. But it does mean that they cannot *continue* to sin without experiencing a work of God's Spirit that will include chastening. John said, *No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.* (1 John 3:6)

If a person can continue to give themselves over to sin, without remorse, they are giving strong indication that they do not know Christ. They may be professing Christians and, as such, members of churches. But our relationship to Christ is not a matter of church identity. It is a vital union with him that produces substantial change in our lives.

What Paul is saying is that a Christian can behave in a carnal way. We can give in to the desires of the flesh. Thus he warns against the various sins of the flesh. But he is also saying that there is no such thing as a "carnal Christian." Many in today's church have been taught that one can be saved and still not show ongoing evidence of it. They reduce salvation to a decision made in an evangelistic meeting. For them, to say the right words and pray the right prayer is true salvation.

But the Bible makes it clear that if the salvation, that we have experienced is the work of the Spirit of God, it will make a substantial difference in our lives. There will be evidence that God is at work to discipline us, in both positive and negative ways. The real evidence of knowing Christ is love for him and love

for others. And someone who loves will not lead others into sin. Someone who loves will not give themselves to sexual sins, to the worship of false Gods, to anger and resentment, to the practice of divisiveness, or to drunken excess.

Such things do not characterize the lives of believers. Their lives are to be marked by the work of the Spirit of God and that is where the apostle next directs his attention.

Historically, the scriptural doctrine that we have been talking about is called the doctrine of perseverance. There are those who profess to be Christians but fall away from Christian practice. They do not attend worship and give no real indication that their lives have been changed by God's power. But when the Holy Spirit is present there will be evidence. There will be a continuing remorse concerning remaining sin in our lives, and a continuing desire to walk in the way of Christ.

Questions for discussion:

1. Why are sexual sins especially troublesome for a Christian? Cf. 1 Corinthians 6
2. Can one be an idolater without literally bowing before an idol?
3. How seriously should Christians take the occult practices that are so prevalent in the world today?
4. What sort of motives might cause someone to create division in the body of Christ?
5. How does a desire for recognition from others create problems within the church?

THE SPIRIT'S WORK: LOVE, JOY, PEACE

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace... [5:22a]

Now Paul turns his attention to the manifest works of the Holy Spirit. The apostle had earlier commanded the Galatians to “live by the Spirit” and thus avoid the gratification of the flesh. But it is at this point in his argument that he identifies the works of the Spirit, setting them before us in contrast with what the flesh produces in our lives.

Love

The first “fruit” of the Holy Spirit which Paul mentions is love. This should not surprise us when we remember that the same apostle called love the greatest of the spiritual gifts from God. (1 Corinthians 13:13)

What does Paul mean by “love?” The Greek word that he uses is “agape.” There were several words available to the apostle which we would be able to translate into English as “love.” But, in the New Testament, the word “agape” was favored as the most appropriate word to express the particular understanding of love which Christians held. This was understood to be what the Lord Jesus Christ was motivated by when he died on the cross, in the place of undeserving sinners. And it was also this word which was used to explain what he established as an enduring example for his people. There is something of a parallel between what Paul wrote in this passage, by warning us against the works of the flesh and then pointing us to the fruit of the Spirit as our pattern for life, and the words of Peter. He warned against the practice of fleshly works (1 Peter 2:1; 2:11), and we are pointed by Peter to the cross of Christ as the example of the kind of life that we should live. (1 Peter 2:21-23)

It is the cross that defines what the New Testament writers mean by *love*. This is no mere affection that has for its fountainhead the feelings or desires of a man or woman. This is a love that transcends romantic love. Romantic love desires the object in the hope of having that love returned. Romantic love sees the object of desire as something that is worthy by virtue of its beauty.

This is not even brotherly love that arises from a sense of loyalty to family,

as noble as that may be. This is a love that arises from the heart of the lover. This is a love that proceeds from the very nature of our God. He has chosen us to be his own, and he did so in eternity past. He did not do this because of any good that he saw in us. He did not do this because he needed us to make him happy. He did not do this because he saw how beautiful we were, and therefore wanted to spend all eternity with us. In the beginning God did fashion us to be good and beautiful creatures. That was the fruit of his own creative genius. But sin and rebellion against the Lord marred all that.

Then why did God love us? The answer lies in John's words, *God is love*. The Lord loved us not because of anything in us, but because he chose to do so. And this love is one that proves itself by a selfless attitude and ultimately by selfless deeds, done on behalf of the beloved. Therefore, when we were discovered to be helpless in our sins, Christ came and died for us, and this is the essence of what *agape* love is all about.

When the apostle Paul speaks about love in this sense his reference point is the cross. He is calling us to act as Christ did. He is telling us that if our salvation is real, if there really was a work of the Holy Spirit, the evidence of that work will be a Christ-like love. We will relate to others in imitation of Christ. We will seek their good without regard to whether or not it is in our "best interest."

Think of what the practical implications of this were for men and women living in the world of the first century. For example, a slave owner who had become a Christian would now have to consider the question of continuing to hold men and women in bondage. What would really be in their best interest? The question of monetary loss to the owner could not be a factor.

And what about us? Can we relate to people as the pagans of today do? Can we simply try to avoid conflict? Or, should we try really loving them? There is a big difference between just avoiding a quarrel and being activist in love toward others. Real love will be a matter of both word and deed.

If we are to love as God has loved us we will speak the truth in a way that seeks the redemption of other people. The ordinary functions of living in this world require us to do many things that are not primarily "spiritual" in character. We are often involved with lost people in the life of various institutions. We may participate in government or civic organizations. The way that we conduct ourselves, in both word and deed, will be a testimony concerning what we believe whether we want it to be or not. That is inevitable. But we are to go beyond merely treating people fairly. Christ our Lord calls us to love, even at great expense to ourselves. When the Lord died on the cross he was not merely trying to get along without causing conflict. He knew that his teaching and the

life that he had lived were sure to cause conflict. He even said that he had not come to bring peace to the world.

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household." (Matthew 10:34-36)

How could a holy and loving Lord say that he had come to set close relatives at variance with one another? The answer lies in the nature and purpose of the gospel. Truth does not matter to many people in our day, but it does matter to God. If there is only one way to God, and that through his son, our Lord Jesus, then we cannot simply acquiesce in tacit agreement with what the people of this world believe. The world's "truth" must be challenged and Christ held up before the nations as their only hope. This often means that we will find ourselves in conflict, that we have not sought, because we desire to communicate the truth of the gospel itself to those who are ignorant of it. It may very well divide families as some family members come to Christ, while others do not.

And the practical outworking of our service to our Lord may be a stumbling stone to others. We have been commanded to live at peace with all men, as much as it lies with us to achieve it. But we also must not compromise our faithful service to Christ in order to "get along" with others. If we are asked to participate in activities that may seem harmless enough to many, but which are clearly unbiblical, then we cannot be disloyal to the word of God. Truth still matters. And it is out of love for the lost that we seek to be consistent in our testimony.

We must not give the impression, if we can avoid it, that we agree with doctrines or practices that run contrary to the truth of the gospel. Remember that Paul had very harsh words for the men who were teaching salvation by Christ plus the works of the law. It is not love that allows people to believe things that ultimately lead them down the path to destruction! The problem for us, as Christians, is that very often to tell people the truth, out of love for them, is not enough. They may very well *not* appreciate our efforts. Most people don't enjoy being told that they are wrong, and religion is a particularly sensitive subject with most of them. But we are called to love as Christ loved, no matter what the consequences. The Lord loved people and thus his ministry, while here on the earth, was uncompromising. He died because of an eternal plan, but also because he would not conform to the ways of this world.

But this does not mean that we are to react in a belligerent way and thus insure that people will continue to oppose us. The apostle Peter called on his readers to follow in the steps of Christ by remembering his example. *When he*

was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him to him who judges justly. (1 Peter 2:23)
 We are called to react to hostility in the same way. To do less is to fail to love as our Lord Jesus Christ loved us.

Joy

The next descriptive word used of the fruit of the Holy Spirit is *joy*. Given the behavior of many professing Christians in our day, one might come to think that being a Christian either makes you a odd sort with a fixed smile who says "Praise the Lord" in response to everything, or that being a Christian means that you get together with other Christians at once a week to complain about your problems.

But in the Bible we are either told by the apostles of the Lord that their work was filled with joy. And we are admonished to rejoice in the Lord. Paul told the Philippians, *I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.* (Philippians 1:3-5). And he instructed them to "rejoice in the Lord!" (Philippians 3:1) This admonition is much more than a call from the leaders of the early church to act happy. This is no request for the Christians to adopt an attitude of mere "positive thinking." This is a call to find one's true happiness in the Lord Jesus Christ. Our experience of Christ should be one of joy and there is no reason why it should not be so.

Why should we be filled with joy because of our relationship to Christ? First, our sins have been removed. Not one single sin, though our sins were very great, remains to allow the finger of accusation to point to us in condemnation.

Christ has come and taken our sins to the cross. They have been punished in Christ, and will not be a ledger of remembrance to bring the wrath of God against us in the day of judgement. Rejoice!

Second, we now have the fullness of Christ living in us bodily (Colossians 2:9-10). We have all the resources that we need to live our lives in this world without fear. What can man do to us? He can oppose us. We will rejoice that we are counted worthy to suffer for Christ. Men can imprison us. Like Paul we will count ourselves prisoners of the Lord Jesus Christ. Men can kill us. But Christ will still be with us and will receive us to himself, and that will be the greatest joy of all!

When temptation comes we can fight the good fight and stand against the evil one. What joy to know that Christ is by our side. Rejoice in the Lord! This is no mere sense of elation that is worked up in us by listening to upbeat

music or by having an inspirational speaker get us “charged up.” Paul is reminding us that to see Christ Jesus for what he is, and to remember what the Lord did for us by dying on the cross, brings the only kind of inner joy that will sustain us in every situation both pleasant and otherwise.

This joy is the work of the Spirit of God and is related to fellowship with other Christians and with the persons of the Trinity. The apostle John spoke of this joy when he gave his testimony concerning the person of Christ and his personal observation of the Lord. We saw him, John says, and we preach him in order that others might come to have fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ. This is also a fellowship with the Father because to see Christ is to see the Father, and all of this is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is fellowship that the believer experiences with the three persons of the triune God. And when we are in joyful communication with our brothers and sisters in Christ we are basking in the glow of the divine presence. An old reflection on the duty of joy says,

*Art thou seeking to rejoice in thyself
 from an evil motive of pride and self-reputation?
 Thou hast nothing of thine own but sin,
 nothing to move God to be gracious,
 or to continue his grace towards thee.
 If thou forget this thou wilt lose thy joy.
 Art thou grieving under a sense of indwelling sin?
 Let godly sorrow work repentance,
 as the true spirit which the Lord blesses,
 and which creates fullest joy;
 Sorrow for self opens rejoicing in God,
 Self-loathing draws down divine delights.
 Hast thou sought joys in some creature comfort?
 Look not below God for happiness;
 fall not asleep in Delilah's lap.
 Let God be all in all to thee,
 and joy in the fountain that is always full.*

Peace

What is your concept of peace? When you hear this much used word what do you think of first? Does your mind turn to the idea of a world at peace, to the various efforts of men and nations to accomplish the absence of warfare among the peoples of the world? Or do you think of the individual's quest for a place

of retreat, for a place to withdraw to and not be troubled by problems ordinary or extraordinary?

In the word of God the first meaning of *peace* is its Godward reference. The Ephesians were told, *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.* (Ephesians 2:13.) This reconciliation between God and man, and in this case, between God and formerly pagan Gentiles, would mean that the warfare which had existed between God and the nations had come to an end, by the cross of Christ. Now those who repented of sin and put their faith in Christ would know real peace. By his gracious gift of salvation through Christ's blood, the Lord brought the former hostility to an end. A peace treaty had been signed and stamped with God's guarantee because of what Christ accomplished for his elect people, chosen from every race, tribe, and nation.

Not only would undeserving sinners be able to draw near to God and have loving, intimate, fellowship with him, they would also be able to draw near to other Christians no matter what their ethnicity. Now even Jews and Gentiles could find peace with each other and discover that they had much more in common through their relationship to Christ than they had ever dreamed possible. Still different, culturally, they could now come to love those who had seemed impossibly foreign to them before.

The word *peace* must also be understood in the light of its Hebrew setting. The Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, means not only the absence of conflict but wholeness of life and blessing as well. To wish someone the blessings that come from God one could simply say *shalom!* Thus when the Lord reconciled us to himself, and ended the hostility that existed between us and him, he said *shalom* to us. Now, not only will you be free of future punishment for your sins, you will have a new and blessed life here on the earth for a time, and then in the new heaven and the new earth forever and forever.

Thus when we come to know God through Christ, and come to have the Holy Spirit living within us, a very important part of the fruit that is produced by the indwelling Spirit is a continual ministration of peace to us. And, like so much that the Spirit does for the believer, and for those who come into redemptive contact with the believer, this peace is shed abroad.

The Lord Jesus Christ said that when we drink of the Spirit we then become a fountain of good things to those around us. *On the last day of the Feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." Now he said this about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.* (John 7:37-39)

It is clear that the Spirit of God has for one of his great works, the transformation of Christians into fountainheads of blessing. The *shalom*, or peace, that comes to us from the Lord is not meant to be treated like the hoard of a miser. On the contrary, the Christian's life is to be one that is given away again and again. The fulness of God dwells in Christ. That fulness has been given to us by the work of the Spirit of God. And out of that fulness we withdraw blessing after blessing, and bestow them on both the lost and the saved.

We tell the lost about their dangerous plight and about the necessity of looking to Christ for salvation. We show love to brothers and sisters in Christ, and in that way we are channels of God's blessing to others. Even some of the spiritual sacrifices that we offer to God are deeds done for the benefit of others. (Hebrews 13:16)

And, in addition to all of this there is the subjective benefit that comes to us. Yes, we have been changed from being the enemies of God. Now we are the friends of God. But we are given a "peace that passes all understanding" as well. Now we may live with the knowledge that, in both good times and in bad, there is a peace that the Lord is willing to minister to our hearts. He who calmed the sea can calm our anxious hearts as well.

Questions for discussion:

1. What great event defines love for the Christian?
2. How is real love costly for believers?
3. We are told not only to be joyful but to rejoice in the Lord. What does that mean?
4. How have we been reconciled to God?
5. What does the Hebrew word *shalom* mean? It is more than absence of conflict?

14

THE SPIRIT'S WORK: PATIENCE, KINDNESS, GOODNESS

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness... [5:22]

Patience

Patience is related to the hope that we have in Christ. When our loved ones die in the Lord, we do not despair because our hope is in the Lord. He will come again one day just as he went away. And, because we have that confidence in Christ, we wait patiently and by faith endure all things.

Things do not always go well for those who know the Lord. We are not wrong in asking the Lord for blessing and for deliverance from tribulation. The section of the Lord's prayer that reads "lead us not into temptation" may be translated, "and do not bring us to the point of testing." We are not to be people who delight in troubles. We are not like the Islamic fanatics who beat themselves with whips in order to show their supposed "godliness."

However, for very good reasons the Lord leads us through differing experiences. G. A. Young wrote,

*Some through the waters, some through the flood,
Some through the fire, but all through the blood;
Some through great sorrow, but God gives a song,
In the night season and all the day long.*

James, speaking to Christians who were suffering ill at the hands of rich oppressors, told them, *Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; the Judge is standing at the door.* (James 5:7-9)

The same apostle went on to remind them of the example of the Old Testament prophets who suffered much for the cause of truth, and of Job who lost almost everything but finally experienced new blessing from the Lord.

Paul himself knew about suffering. During the course of his ministry he was flogged. He even received thirty-nine lashes on five different occasions.

He was shipwrecked, beaten with rods, endured much sleeplessness, and was often hungry and thirsty. He was stoned and left for dead. But he reminded the Galatians that the fruit of the Spirit includes patience in all things.

The Roman Christians were told that present suffering cannot compare with the things that await us in Christ. They were told that the Spirit of God knows our needs perfectly. We cannot have such knowledge in our present state. And since the Lord knows what we need, he is able and willing to shape the circumstances of our lives in such a way as to bring good out of bad things. Paul was able to write, *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* (Romans 8:28)

Joseph was sold by his brothers, falsely accused in the house of Potiphar, and languished in prison for a long time. But the Lord was with him and he waited patiently until the deliverance of the Lord came.

The issue for us as believers is this, what will our attitude be? How will we respond to both pleasant things, and those that are not enjoyable at all? Will we throw up our hands in despair? Will we say, "I cannot go on, following Christ is too costly?" Will we doubt the mercy of the Lord? Will we doubt his willingness and ability to sustain us and give us final deliverance? Or will we trust him?

One can avoid trouble by not taking a stand for truth, but the faithful followers of Christ, in every age, have endured much for the cause of God and truth. Christ's servants have demonstrated faith in the Father's love and mercy. They have patiently awaited the victory that can only come because of his grace.

We serve a Lord who endured the cross. The sinless lamb of God endured the horror of "becoming sin" for us. He patiently endured what the will of the Father had marked out for him to do. We must do the same.

Kindness

One of the most distressing failures that I have observed in myself and in others, over the years, is the callousness of professing Christians toward the feelings of brothers and sisters in Christ. Being a human being, created in the image of God, means that we are personal. And, because the Lord made us to be persons, not things, we communicate. We express ourselves, and that often is the very thing that brings us into conflict with others.

Our communication may be verbal or non-verbal. James warns us about the use of the tongue. *With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.* (James 3:9)

If kindness is one of the manifestations of the fruit of the Spirit, and it is, then the failure to show kindness verbally is one of the greatest problems that exists in God's churches. This may range from out and out slander, in which a brother or sister in Christ wrongly accuses another member of Christ's body, all the way to a dismissive word or two. As a pastor I have often heard one church member respond to the expressed opinion of another, on issues that are really of secondary importance, in a relatively harsh way. "I believe the church sanctuary would look better with green carpet," says one member, and another responds, "We don't need to spend money on that! What a dumb idea!" In this way he or she fails to show basic Christian kindness. Often it is not what you say, so much as how you say it. An opinion expressed in a kind way, perhaps in the form of a question, will not offend nearly so often as one that is voiced in an arrogant way.

There are even more subtle ways that believers fail to show kindness to other believers. A raised eyebrow or some other “body language” indicator can crush someone’s spirit. Or, the converse might be true. One might pass judgment on one’s brother in Christ for a perceived offense when none was intended. That too is a failure to be kind.

And, let us examine this issue in a positive way. There are words and deeds, that may be left undone, which would have been very useful vehicles of kindness. One observes a great difference in Christians as to fundamental acts of courtesy. There are some Christians who never seem to greet others until they have been greeted. They seem to be thinking, “I wonder if he or she will speak to me, I will just wait and see.” Is not the kind thing to say “hello,” or extend a hand of greeting, from the first?

The writer of Hebrews taught us, *Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.* (Hebrews 13:16) We are priests with our Lord Jesus Christ. We offer spiritual sacrifices as a part of our service to God. Deeds of kindness done in the name of Christ are a very important part of this ministry. It is kind to overlook the flaws and failures of others. It is kind to greet people with courtesy. It is kind to avoid using the tongue to hurt others. It is kind to take a gift of food to those who are sorrowing. It is kind to visit the sick.

I have a friend who is a busy seminary professor. When we suffered the loss of a family member he was quick to offer sympathy but he also remembered the loss one year later and expressed continuing concern. That is an act of positive kindness.

And what about family relationships? I have known “Christian” parents who publicly berated their children. Discipline is important but it is something else to verbally embarrass one’s child or one’s spouse. It is kind to consider the feelings of a wife, or husband, or child. It is kind to consider the feelings of one’s brothers and sisters in the church of God. It is kind to speak a word of encouragement that might have been left unsaid.

It is kind to go beyond what might be said or done. When Ruth was gleaning in the field of Boaz, he instructed the workers to drop some of the grain intentionally to help her to collect a good supply. He could have been selfish and simply kept all that he could for himself. He showed kindness.

A fig tree bears figs. A pear tree bears pears. And someone who has truly come to faith in Christ has his character stamped upon them. The work of God’s Spirit will manifest itself in the fruit that is consistent with God’s character.

We will want to be kind to those who are outside the body of Christ, and especially toward those who are Christians.

Goodness

We now come to a word that is deceptive in its profundity. Paul tells us that the fruit of the Spirit includes goodness. We may think it is a “given” that Christians ought to be good. But what does this word signify? When a rich young man approached the Lord Jesus Christ and called him “good teacher” (Mark 10:17), and apparently asked him about “goodness” (cf. Matthew 19:16), the Lord replied that “No one is good except God alone.”

The young man felt confident of his spiritual ability. He believed that he could do whatever was necessary to demonstrate just how good he was. He thought that the essential problem for those who would please God, and go to heaven as a result, was ignorance. He needed to know what to do. “Just tell me what to do and I will do it,” was implied by his question posed to the Lord Jesus. But the Lord gave him a shock. “No one is good except God alone,” said the master.

The young man would have been a likely candidate for the false teaching that had taken root among the Galatians. Suppose the Lord had told him, “Just believe that I am the Messiah and that I shall die and come to life again, and then since you are already circumcised, continue to keep the law without fail.

In this way you will make your contribution and demonstrate to God that you can earn a place in heaven.” Had the Lord Jesus told him that, he would have gone away happy! Instead he went away sad. Why?

The Lord reminded the young man of the second table of the law. He omitted only the commandment against coveting. (Mark 10:19) Still confident of his goodness, the young man insisted that he had kept all these commandments since his youth. He thought himself to be a truly good young man.

But the Lord challenged him to give all to the poor and come and follow him. He would give up his earthly treasure, but he would have treasure in heaven one day. The young man was appalled. How could he do such a thing? He was in love with his wealth and not with the Lord. And it was an easy thing for the Lord Jesus to expose. This young man did not understand that only God is good. Only God has never sinned. Only God has perfect love for others.

Here is the heart of the gospel. The Lord from heaven came down to love undeserving sinners. He died for his people’s salvation on a very cruel cross.

He did not cling to the treasures of heaven, but divested himself of these things for a time in order to redeem us. He is the only example that can be given of real “goodness” (perfect obedience to the laws of God) in a human life. He was the incarnate God. He alone is good.

But still Paul tells us that Christians must have goodness in their lives.

When the Lord saves us, he does not merely deliver us from future judgement. He sends his Spirit to indwell us. We can never be the same again because the Spirit of the living God is in us. There will be evidence of our new relationship to God. God is now remaking us. The image of God that was marred by the fall will be restored. Christ is the very image of God and we will one day be like him.

At present, the goodness of God which is perfect is at work in us. We still have the problem of remaining sin. But we received the Holy Spirit when we received Christ. It is not too much to say that the goodness which belongs to God alone is reflected in his creatures. It is true that we ought to try to honor our God by lives that are worthy of his righteousness. But it is also true that there is a spiritual harvest which is wrought in the lives of believers. The fruit that is “gathered” will be full of the goodness of God. We are not good in the sense that God is. Only God is good in perfection. But God has entered our lives in a redemptive way. He is transforming us. He is making us over into a people who look more and more like him.

We are not among those who believe that by keeping the law (being good) we can ever save ourselves. That was a message which the rich young man wanted to hear. He heard something else and went away sad. We, on the other hand, have heard and believed that we are sinners who deserve hell. But we have gone away happy because we also have discovered a source of perfect goodness and the ability to demonstrate that goodness through Christ by the Spirit. We have become people who love the law of God and seek to keep it, not to save ourselves, but because we have been saved.

Questions for discussion:

1. How was Joseph a good example of patient endurance?
2. How serious is a Christian’s failure to use his tongue in a kind way?
3. What did the Lord mean by saying that God alone is good? Cf. Mark 10:17-18
4. What problem do we have in this life that mitigates against our good behavior?
5. Whose goodness saves us?

THE SPIRIT’S WORK: FAITHFULNESS, GENTLENESS, SELF-CONTROL

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there

is no law. [5:22-23]

Faithfulness

Again and again in the Bible the word “faithful” is applied to God. It is our Lord who has demonstrated his utter faithfulness to his people. The Psalmist gives us a typical example of biblical ascriptions of praise to God for his faithfulness to his people. *I have not hidden your deliverance within my heart; I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation...* (Psalm 40:10a)

It is only because of the faithfulness of the Lord to us that we are preserved by grace. *The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.* (Lamentations 3:22-23)

But the word of God is filled with descriptions of the faithlessness of Israel in Old Testament times and of many professing Christians in the New Testament. Malachi recorded the word of judgement that came to Israel from the Lord concerning their lack of faithfulness in the support of the Levites and their ministry of the word. *Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.* (Malachi 3:8-10)

Many years ago I invited a well known preacher to come and speak at the church where I was pastor. I was to give him a ride to church on Sunday morning.

But, when the time came to leave for church, my car would not start. I simply called the number of a seminary student, who I felt would not be going to church on Sunday morning, and asked if I could borrow his car. There were quite a few students like that. They were not faithful then, and the years have demonstrated that they have not been faithful since.

I have known many pastors who have not been faithful to study the word of God and preach it well. They administer programs. They work to curry favor with those who they think are the power brokers in the churches. They seek their advancement in the denomination in various ways, but they are not faithful in doing what God has called them to do.

I have known musicians who are musicians first and Christians second. They see the church as an opportunity to make money, or to receive applause as they “perform” for Christ. They are not faithful to teach the church by the means of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

I have known men and women who were glad to participate in various church related organizations, but were not faithful to the services of the church. Is the Lord pleased with this? And what of professing Christians who do go to church but are profane in their daily lives? How can God be pleased with this? Surely they are not to be counted as faithful!

Faithfulness is obedience to the revealed will of God. It is to honor God's word and seek to obey. It is to set an example of consistent church attendance.

It is to live exemplary lives before an unbelieving world. It is to support the ministry of the word and the minister of the word in both word and deed.

Such faithfulness comes in the lives of Christians who are truly born again and have the Spirit of God indwelling them. Such faithfulness comes in the lives of Christians who are trusting the Lord, and seeking to be obedient to him.

Gentleness

Long ago the prophet Zechariah foretold the coming of the King of Kings. *Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you, righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.* (Zechariah 9:9)

The national monarchs might ride on white steeds and parade in pomp before their subjects but the monarch of the universe would come in a humble unpretentious fashion. He would be a gentle king. There would be no terrifying display of military power. He would come, not to lord it over those entrusted to his care, but to save them. He would come, as the most *humble* of men, to submit himself to his elect people for their eternal good.

Ironically, the English word "gentle" has come to be associated with the nobility of this world. Many years ago, the terms "gentleman" or "gentlewoman" were used to denote someone of high social rank, a member of the ruling class.

If one is referring to earthly status then this is clearly not the way the term is used in scripture. However, if one is thinking of our status as people who rule and reign with Christ, we begin to see a similarity in the use of the word.

The Authorized Version of 1611 gives the Greek word used here (*prautes*) as "meekness." The problem for translators is that while the word "meekness" refers to an aspect of one's character that produces certain actions and prohibits others, the word gives an impression of weakness. This is not the case with the Greek word *prautes*. One who is "meek" before others is not so because of weakness but because of strength.

The truth that undergirds this call for us to be "meek" or "gentle" or "humble" is that we have a strength that others do not have, and therefore can exercise

meeekness of attitude and gentleness in action. Thus it is not out of weakness that we behave in a certain way, but out of the strength that has been given to us by our union with Christ.

And what sort of life is truly a gentle life? Is this not the opposite of a harsh, censorious spirit? Someone who is constantly critical of his brothers and sisters in Christ is hardly manifesting this aspect of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Is this not living in a way that is absent of arrogant sternness? Is this not a life that is directed toward the good of others and away from judgements that cause us to rush to harsh words or violence?

In order to demonstrate this quality in one's life there must be a proper submission to the authority of the word of God. James calls us to *humbly* accept the word planted in you, which can save you." (James 1:21b) This is the same disposition of heart and mind which is now being applied to our relationship to the Lord and to his word.

The apostle Paul, in writing to Titus, tells him to *Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.* (Titus 3:1-2)

When the Lord taught the people the true meaning of the law, in what we call the "sermon on the mount," he said, *Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.* (Matthew 5:5) It is the Lord's right to inherit all things because he has ruled over sin and death and hell with *meeekness* of spirit, and with the *gentleness* of grace toward undeserving sinners. And as we reign with him, we discover what this means in our relationships.

Perhaps the most important exhortation in all of this concerns our responsibility to imitate the attitude and practice of the Lord himself. The Lord Jesus Christ used this term to describe himself in Matthew 11:29. *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.* This is the self description of the Lord who taught his disciples to avoid lording it over each other as the pagan rulers were wont to do.

Christ becomes our example of how to relate to others, whether it is to our brothers and sisters in Christ or to the people of this world. We must identify with him in his spirit of humility before God and man. This is not something that comes from being weak and helpless, but from the very strength of the Lord.

When we behave in a gentle way we are using resurrection power, the very power that raised our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ from the dead. **This is the great paradoxical principle of Christian living.**

Self-control

The American Unitarian preacher and writer Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “men’s prayers are a disease of the will” and encouraged people to rely on themselves above all. In his essay “Self-Reliance” Emerson concluded that “nothing can bring you peace but yourself.” This transcendentalist writer had turned his back on the religion of his fathers, and on the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

We do not teach self-reliance. We teach reliance on the true and living God. Everything that comes with our experience of Christ is a matter of faith in him, and in his ability to do what needs to be done to work in us to accomplish the will of God. And we know, from the word of God, that true peace can never come from within. True peace comes to those who depend on the Lord Jesus Christ to save them.

But there is a place for self in the working out of our salvation. We do not save ourselves nor could we. When we are unbelievers we lie dead in our trespasses and sins. Our wills are dead to God. We are like spiritual corpses who are incapable of willing anything that is good and pleasing to the Lord. But when Christ comes to us, by the invisible work of the very Spirit whose “fruit” we are thinking about right now, he renews our wills and gives us the ability to respond to the Lord, and to serve him all our days. This will be done imperfectly, of course, as we have not been made entirely whole. We still have remaining sin in us and there is a struggle between what we are as the children of God and what we are as sinners. But, whereas before we were dead to God and goodness, now we are renewed and made alive by the Spirit.

With this new ability comes new responsibility. We are told that we should resist the devil and that if we do so he will flee from us. This is not something that we passively await in the hope that God will simply intervene and do it for us. Truly, it is God who is at work in us. But paradoxically we are called upon to work ourselves. (Philippians 2:12-13)

Thus we are told that we must exercise self-control. This is really nothing new. Old Testament saints who were regenerated by God’s Spirit did the same, or at least were supposed to do so. Moses brought calamity upon himself, in such a way as to bar him from entering the promised land, by not using self-control.

In his anger he went beyond what God had commanded him to do. The Lord had instructed him to speak to the rock in order to find a flow of water for the thirsty people. Moses, on the other hand, struck the rock in a display of temper. He did not exercise the self-control that he should have. Cf. Numbers 20:2-13

If the consequence was this bad for Moses, who was greatly used by God,

surely we must realize that we may bring significant difficulty into our lives by not using the personal restraint that we should.

Joseph is a good example of such restraint the Old Testament. He did not lose self-control and give in to the seductive efforts of Potiphar's wife. He did not lose self-control and turn away from God, even though it must have seemed that the Lord had forgotten him as he languished in prison. He did not lose self-control and use his immense power after he had become the vice-regent of all Egypt. When he was reunited with the brothers that had sold him into slavery, he gave them his love and blessing. He could have sought revenge.

But it is the Lord Jesus Christ who is our greatest example of self-control. He had accepted the limitations of our human existence, but could have called upon the angels to come to his rescue in any difficult situation. Even when he was beaten and mocked and abused, he did not retaliate. When he was nailed to the cross he endured all for our sake. His name was Jesus (the name means "Jehovah saves") and he had come to save his people from their sins. In order to accomplish this he had to restrain himself. He alone faced temptation and never sinned. He is the perfect example of one who exercised self-control.

Where does such behavior come from? Again, the paradox is that we can only control ourselves by trusting the Lord to control us. This is where Emerson, and others who rejected biblical teaching, went wrong. In order to live a life that is worthy of the gospel we must not allow our fleshliness to get the best of us. We must, like the Lord, use self-control.

When Paul had finished listing the various aspects of the "fruit" of the Holy Spirit he added, "against such things there is no law." One will never transgress God's holy will by doing good. When we seek to be obedient to the Lord we are acknowledging that his way is the right one. It is the same thing as praying, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

1. What task is a pastor primarily to show faithfulness in?
2. Will faithful church attendance cancel out a lack of faithfulness from day to day?
3. When Christians seek power over others how have they failed to be gentle?
4. Should a Christian wait passively for God to make him obedient in all things?
Cf. James 4:7
5. What is the difference between self-reliance and self-control for the Christian?

CARING ABOUT THE NEEDS OF OTHERS

And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.
[Galatians 5:24-25]

After listing the manifestations of the flesh and of the Spirit, the apostle then reminds us of their relationship to Christ's saving work. It was at the cross that he saved us, and it was the crucifixion that defines our present ability.

When we were dead in trespasses and sins we served the flesh alone. Without the benefits of Christ's death we could do no good that would be acceptable to God. That is not to say that a lost person cannot do "good" things. Even in our depraved condition we still have moral motions. But our actions will never be for the right reasons. Our motives will always be the wrong ones.

On the other hand, when we come to Christ we have the possibility of serving him with the right motive of heart. Because we are thankful, and because Christ deserves our praise and adoration, we can now seek to be obedient to him in order to glorify him. This is something very new.

When Christ died on the cross we "died" with him. The Lord was crucified almost two thousand years ago. How is it that we make connection with that event? How can Paul say that we have crucified the flesh?

It was the Holy Spirit that joined us to Christ by the work of regeneration, the new birth. Even though we live almost two thousand years after God did this great work of salvation, we, by the Spirit's work, are so united with Christ our substitute that it may be said that we *died with him*. And the apostle makes much in several of his letters about the death of the flesh that has come to us by Christ. As our Lord died, taking our sins away by suffering the penalty that we deserved, so now we are given the ability to die in experience to sin in our lives. The works of the flesh have been crucified and may be put to death in experience.

In the same way the works of the Spirit have been brought to life, by the resurrection of Christ, and we may put on a heavenly character by that same power.

We may indeed **reject the works of darkness**, if we will continue to depend on Christ to make it so in our lives, and bring to realization, in our lives, the works

of God.

And so, Paul exhorts us to walk with, or keep in step with the Spirit.” When I was a soldier we were required to keep in step. This was true in marching along to the tune that the band was playing, but it was also true of our lives day to day. We needed to be “in step” with our commander’s orders. So it is with Christians. We must obey our commander, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Mutual concern

After warning the Galatians to walk with the Spirit of God, Paul immediately turns his thoughts to those who do not keep in step at one point or another.

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. [6:1]

The time may very well come when, because of the ongoing seriousness of an offense, it will become necessary to deal rather harshly with an offender. This was the case at Corinth where the church was proud of their toleration in the matter of a man who was living with his father’s wife. The apostle instructed them to put the man out of their fellowship. This would be, in effect, a “handing over of the man to Satan” that would be redemptive in nature. The hoped for goal was the ultimate reclamation of the man so that even though his “flesh” would be destroyed, his spirit would be saved on the day of judgement. (1 Corinthians 5:4-5) In the case of public sins that show disregard for the laws of God, the time may come when it would be wrong to continue to regard such a man or woman as a brother or sister in good standing. (1 Corinthians 5:9-11)

But there are many failures that can be dealt with by a firm but gentle hand of correction. Such things are public offenses because they are publicly known and they touch the life of the church as a whole. If the church addresses them in a timely way, the offender may very well be convicted of his or her sin, and seek the forgiveness of both the Lord and their brothers and sisters in Christ.

In the case of personal offenses that threaten the unity of the body of Christ we have a clear word from the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Matthew 18:15-20 records the words of our Lord concerning these sins. There is an order that has been established by the Lord. First the individual who has suffered an offense should go and speak to the offending brother or sister in person. That may be the end of the matter. Reconciliation may come as the result of the effort and the church will not have to be involved at all.

But if the offending party is reluctant to repent, the offended individual is authorized to take with him one or two reliable witnesses who can testify about the truth of the situation if need be. And, if there is still no repentance the final step is to “tell it to the church.” If the church agrees that a serious offense has taken place then the church should make an appeal to the sinner. If there is still no repentance the only recourse then is to “treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” This does not mean that we will be uncivil to such a person. God’s people are still called to kindness but it does mean that we will no longer think of this person as a redeemed soul. We will approach them as we would a pagan. We will seek to help them understand the gospel and call them to repent of their sins and put their faith in the Lord.

In Galatians, chapter six, Paul seems to have in mind the very public sins of some and the threat that such sins pose to the cause of Christ. An individual has been caught in sin. The behavior of believers should not be a matter of treating that person with a censorious spirit. Instead, other Christians should try and reason with this professing member of the body of Christ. This should be done in a very gentle way so that the people of God do not fall into the sin of Phariseeism (thinking themselves to be perfect). There is always the danger that, in seeking to remove the speck that is in our brother’s eye, we will fail to see the telephone pole sticking out of our own. That is why Paul warns them, “But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.”

We are here to serve others in the name of Christ. He died for undeserving sinners. We are to live for both those who are seeking to live in a “spiritual” way and for those who are not. As the Lord “came to seek and to save that which was lost,” so we continue to seek those who stray from the fold. This must be done with wisdom so that we do not fall into a trap of Satan’s making ourselves.

The problem with pride

For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load. [6:3-5]

The last generation has been a “me” generation. “Self-centered” publications sell. There are “how to” books on improving your personal enjoyment of all kinds of things. Most of these books assume that it is good to be self-fulfilled by seeking self-satisfaction. The Lord has given us this world to enjoy, but not in a selfish way.

An entire generation of children has been reared in the public schools of the land under a philosophy of self-esteem. Even those who cannot do well in school, because of natural limitations, have become the objects of an effort to convince them that they are special beyond belief, just for existing. It has gotten way out of hand.

Not only is that so, but this movement has accomplished the very opposite of what was intended. Children who were convinced by their parents and teachers that they were at the center of the universe, and that all good should come to them, are forced to wake up to the very real “dog eat dog” world. They do not get the fine jobs that they think they so richly deserve. They marry, only to discover that marriage is not an institution designed to advance their personal pleasure. They make attempts at friendship only to discover that their friends play them false, and seem to believe that they are themselves the ones who are really at the center of the universe. A sense of depression is the result. The suicide rate has sky rocketed in recent years.

Why all the problems? And, why does the apostle Paul warn against thinking of yourself in an inflated sort of way? We are all sinners and sin is self-service. It is also very self-destructive of course, but the sinner who gives in to such a philosophy can only see immediate gratification.

Such self-seeking works against the cause of Christ. We are all “nothings” without the grace of God. It is true that as creatures of God we are a part of the creative work which the Lord pronounced “good.” But sin entered in. Adam and Eve decided that their will was to be preferred over that of an all wise God. They were deceived into believing that their desires should take precedence over the just commandments of God. The centuries since have been a continuing exercise in self-justification. This is normally done by comparing ourselves with others. It is not too hard to look about and find someone at any given moment who appears to be “a worse person than I am.” And such a comparison encourages us to think, “I must be someone really special and worthy of the acclaim and service of others.” But Paul warns that each person must not measure himself or herself by the standard of others. We must test ourselves against the righteousness of God as revealed in Christ. If we are truly living our lives in a self-sacrificing way then we can boast in ourselves. But no one is ever selfless to the degree that our Lord was.

This passage also teaches us that each person must accept responsibility. Those who try to avoid doing what is right are not living in a way that glorifies Christ. The opposite of self serving behavior is service in the name of Christ. When one accepts a job for the kingdom of God, whether it is paid or voluntary, one should not take the world’s attitude. The people of this world try to avoid

work. They say you can require me to do just so much, but no more!

The Christian says, "I am willing to do more than is required of me." And, when the Christian has finished the task he or she then takes the attitude, "I have only done my duty, and I am an unworthy servant of Christ." To do otherwise is to fail to be a Christian after the radical calling of the Lord. Do you see the paradox in this passage? Verse two of chapter six commands us to "Bear one another's burdens." Verse five tells us that each person should "bear his own load." When we seek to bear our own burdens, and the burdens of others, there is a dynamic created which fosters true Christian love and fellowship.

The needs of one's pastor

One who is taught the word must share all good things with the one who teaches. [6:6]

The Galatian Christians knew a world where pagan priests lived by charges placed on the various functions of their priesthood. There was no attempt made to provide a regular salary for them as they would be "paid" for services rendered.

The Galatians had left the pagan world but many of their pagan attitudes about life were still clinging to them. They needed to be carefully instructed in the things of God. Those pastors who held the responsibility of instruction deserved their financial support.

When the Lord sent out his disciples during his public ministry he told them that "the laborer deserves his wages." There is every indication that our Lord intended for his servants to be supported by the churches. They had been called to give themselves to the ministry of the word as preachers of gospel truth.

Their needs were to be supplied by the people who were the beneficiaries of the preached word. The apostle Paul quotes the same passage of scripture (Luke 10:7), and thereby places the gospel of Luke on the same plane of inspiration as the Old Testament Scriptures.

Writing to Timothy, Paul says, *Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and "The laborer deserves his wages."* (1 Timothy 5:17-18)

A very literal translation makes a clear distinction between those who fail to discharge their responsibility in this matter and those who do. The passage may be read, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially the ones who *work hard* at preaching and teaching." Paul recognized that there would be pastors who would neglect their primary responsibility. They

would busy themselves with all sorts of activities *except the teaching of the word*. After all, preaching the word well requires much study. Only those who are faithful in this task should be given double honor. And what did this expression “double honor” mean? The first born son in Israel was given a double portion of the inheritance. In other words, he received twice as much as his brothers. According to Paul, the support given to the pastors who taught the word of God should be like that. The people who received the benefit of the word must not be stingy. In fact they should think of “the double portion” when pastoral support was the issue.

How different this is from the attitude of many people in our day! They worry about how to “get by” with paying their pastors as little as possible. Pastors wives are forced into the work place unnecessarily in order to supplement their husbands pitiful salary, or they suffer needlessly with a heavy burden of debt in order to provide for their families. Many churches are already under God’s temporal judgement for their failure at this point. How blessed the pastor is whose support is biblical!

In our day it is often the case that pastors neglect the ministry of the word. They may become more like business administrators. They become “good guys” who never confront people with anything unpleasant from the word of God.

Pastors who can “relate” to their church members by ignoring difficult passages are the most likely to receive stronger monetary support.

Another great problem in the modern church is that we tend to spread ourselves too thinly in the use of tithes and offerings. The primary use of money in the early church was the support of the pastor, the relief of the poor, and the support of efforts to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Today much of the money that is given in good faith is then used in a frivolous and selfish way. People attend church meetings in order to make certain that their group in the congregation gets something to spend *on themselves*. Many churches are as likely to spend money on a new bowling alley for the membership’s pleasure as pastoral support. Or, they may discover that they need to pay a weight loss guru to come and help battle the result of their self indulgence. The last generation saw the construction of “Christian gyms.” This is certainly an area of congregational life that needs to be reformed in our day. In the very next passage the apostle reminds us that we reap what we sow. Many churches are reaping judgement for their failure in pastoral support.

Why did Paul bring up this subject in a letter that has for its principal goal setting forth the true gospel of God’s grace? It would seem that Paul is saying, “You have been given a great gift from God. Your sins have been pardoned and it cost you nothing. You have been given a new standing with God that guarantees

eternal life. That cost you nothing. Can you not see that you owe the Lord your very life? Can you not see that the true Christian, who has been redeemed by the blood of Christ will want to spend his very self in a great kingdom enterprise until the Lord returns.

A man reaps what he sows

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit, will from the Spirit reap eternal life. Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. [6:7-10]

Having reminded the Galatians that pastoral support was their responsibility, Paul goes on to impress on their minds and hearts the importance of a life that is given over to the purposes of the kingdom of God and of the folly of trying to fool God.

The apostle is *not* referring to a blasphemous outburst when he says that “God cannot be mocked.” He is *not* speaking about a great public offense that will be rewarded with a thunderbolt from above. The Galatians, in their arguments for faith plus circumcision were holding a doctrinal and practical position which “pleased” the desires of the flesh. The issue here is not simply a matter of fleshly indulgence. The Galatian error was “fleshly” in that it argued for a “salvation” which was the result of God’s work plus man’s work. Their view of man was too exalted. They, like all of the advocates of works righteousness, refused to see the hopelessness and helplessness of mankind. They held to a view of the flesh that was far too optimistic and without any Biblical support.

But God is omniscient. He sees all and remembers all things. When people sow fleshly seed the result will be just what one might expect. We must remember the context. In chapter five we were taught that there are certain clear indications of fleshliness and spirituality. The “fruit” of the flesh (sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like) will result in one’s not being able to inherit the kingdom of God. Does this mean that such people will spend eternity in hell?

That is precisely what it means, and that is one of the chief reasons why this matter is so important.

Paul would disagree with contemporary popular religion. When people die

and a “Christian” service is held, it would seem that everyone is heaven bound.

The life’s testimony may have been *fleshly*, not at all *heavenly*, but the friends of the deceased rationalize their way to a strong confidence about the salvation of the departed. On the other hand, Paul is teaching us that those who sow to the flesh, that is those who live in a flesh pleasing way, are not saved at all.

It is only those who sow to the Spirit that truly know the Lord and his salvation.

The point is this, when the Holy Spirit has come into one’s life by the new birth, he produces fruit that is consistent with his divine character. He works to produce Christlikeness in those who truly belong to the Lord. They will *not* manifest love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22) in their lives in order to *achieve* salvation by their own power. But since the power of God is in them, by the grace of God, they will produce the fruit of the Spirit. Will this be done perfectly in this life? No, but it will be done. There will be evidence of the work of God in the heart. And this sort of temporal “sowing” will reap from the Spirit eternal life.

Our wills are renewed by Christ when he saves us. Previously we were dead in trespasses and sin. As such, we were beyond self help and desperately needed the Holy Spirit of God to touch us with redeeming grace. But now, since our wills are alive to God, we can and must be told to “sow” to the Spirit and not to the flesh. The converted soul will hear and obey. There may be times when we will be tempted to despair of seeing a great harvest of righteousness. But God will give the harvest at the appropriate time. We are not to give up. We are to persevere.

Notice that this responsibility calls us to love everyone. Can we love an enemy who wants to kill us? The Lord is not asking us to ignore bad behavior.

But if our enemies are hungry, we will feed them. We will leave vengeance to the Lord. Such a willingness to obey the Lord will be strong evidence of a true work of the Holy Spirit in the heart. Such behavior on the part of the redeemed will be consistent with the “fruit” of the Spirit.

Questions for discussion:

1. What biblical method should be used to show love and concern for those who bring disgrace to the cause of Christ by their sins?
2. What is the problem with comparing ourselves with others to adjudicate our spiritual progress?
3. What is the biblical standard for the support of pastors?
4. What is the biblical standard for judging whether or not a pastor is doing a good job?

5. What is the only evidence that we have for believing that a professing Christian who dies is really with the Lord?

17

THE CROSS OF CHRIST AND THE NEW CREATION

See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cause of Christ. [6:11-12]

Jellyfish for Christ

At this point Paul turns his attention to those who want to make a “good showing” and so find it convenient to approve the practice of requiring the Gentiles to be circumcised. The apostle accuses them of being without courage. They are like jellyfish, they have no spiritual spine and so an offense against the gospel is nothing to them. If they can avoid opposition and especially persecution, then all will be well.

The same is true today. There are many people who confess the name of Christ, and may in fact be born again, but they give in to the flesh. When faced with the possibility of criticism for loyalty to Christ, they fold.

The way this is most often expressed in our day is by a very broad acceptance of anyone and anything that is called “Christian.” According to this way of thinking, if you name the name of Christ you must be a Christian. This allows people to enter into alliances and common worship services with groups that deny important teachings of the Bible, and particularly the truth of the gospel.

How can someone who knows that salvation is by grace through faith enter into compromising relationships with those who do not believe in that essential doctrine, as if all is well? If a church holds to the truth that salvation is not based on our good works, or on faith in Christ plus our good works, but then participates in joint worship with those who do believe these things, the message that goes out to the world is clear. We’re OK, and so are you. This is sheer relativism. I’m OK, you’re OK, everybody is OK. Let’s just love one another! The fact that we may believe very different things about the gospel of Christ just does not enter into the discussion for many.

The truth is that such compromise *is not love*. If we know the truth and

then obscure it for others by letting them think that their unbiblical beliefs and practices are just fine, we are greasing their slippery slope into an eternity of torment. And if the Lord held those who did that in Paul's day responsible, he will do the same today.

To make people think that all is well when it is not is the very opposite of love. It is to say, "I don't care if you spend eternity in hell. What I care most about is that you will think that I am tolerant. What I am most concerned about is that you should not be offended because I do not believe that you know Christ as your Savior. I don't want anyone to say anything bad about me that might not be good for the cause of my personal reputation. You may go to hell, but far be it from me to say or do anything that would cause you to dislike me in this world!"

The Judaizers in Paul's day had found a way to take the sting out of their identification with Christ. They would get Gentiles to be circumcised, even though that would be a denial of the gospel of God's grace. They would then point to their success in making "good Jews" out of the Gentiles. And they hoped for result would be that those Jews who were capable of creating problems for them would leave them alone.

How different the experience of the apostles! Paul suffered imprisonment, flogging, beatings with rods, stoning, and opposition from faithless "brothers."

How can we say that we are Christians and not be willing to take positions that are unpopular? How can we say that we are Christians, and that we love lost people, and then participate in activities that ignore the fact that there are many in the world today who add to faith in Christ the works of man, and thus create another "gospel." Paul told the Galatians that such people "pervert the gospel of Christ."

In our day alliances with groups and individuals who do not hold to the gospel is even considered "evangelistic." We rationalize that we are establishing relationships with lost people. Why we *might* even lead someone to Christ. How many come to Christ in this way? I do not know of one. The Lord can use many things and does. That is his business. Ours is to be faithful to Christ and to his word. Ours is to be faithful to the gospel. Ecumenism is good but only if it is based on common belief in the gospel. To walk with others when there is agreement is blessed indeed!

Boasting only in the cross

For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which

the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. [6:13-14]

The Judaizers who had troubled the church with their advocacy of belief in Christ plus circumcision, as a substitute gospel, wanted to boast in the result of their influence on others. They, like so many, wanted to make disciples, not for the Lord, but for themselves. They wanted to introduce others to their own hypocrisy and fashion them into memorials to that hypocrisy.

But Paul would only boast in Christ and specifically in the cross of Christ. The apostle recognized that the most important event that had ever occurred in the history of the world was the death of Christ. Never again would God do something so wondrous. All the glory of the future would flow from the historical fountain of the cross.

Paul could boast about the cross. This was the great redemptive act that put things right. Our ancestors, Adam and Eve, by their sin, had brought great misery into the world. Their disobedience resulted in our experiencing an inclination to sin that arises from within. The cross would bring the only true relief for that misery.

Satan had usurped the power and position that belonged to Jesus Christ, the true King of this world. The cross was the victory that brought Satan low and guaranteed his ultimate downfall. It was God's great plan, which was revealed when our Lord died in the place of his people on the cross, that accomplished this great feat. It was the cross that made it possible for us to be set free from the powers of darkness.

And, it was the cross that brought us freedom from the deceptions of this world and all its religious and philosophical systems. No longer would we be kept in darkness. The cross was a great light that beamed forth across the land.

Christ had died in the place of sinners. Christ crucified was the normative truth above every other truth. All things were dependent on the Lord Jesus Christ, and on what he accomplished by his death. This world would never be the same. And it could never deceive us with the same success again.

Paul expresses this by saying that, by the cross of Christ, *the world had been crucified to him and he to the world.* It was what the Lord accomplished on the cross that gives us the power to reject this world with all of its temptations.

It was the cross that gives us the power and wisdom to reject the man-made systems that teach an evolutionary view of human history, and of salvation. The works based systems of human "redemption" all assume that human beings are capable of achieving their own "salvation" by means of their own devising. But the cross gives the lie to that position. The cross levels everyone. The cross reveals that every human being is full of sin and that Christ is the only exception.

We all are exposed by the cross as *helpless* before God. We all are exposed by the cross as guilty rebels against the holy will of our creator. The perfect obedience of Christ, that was revealed by his death on the cross, exposes our failure to obey God perfectly. It clearly shows that we deserve eternal death.

And so we put our faith in Christ and find an alien righteousness, a righteousness that we desperately need. We, by faith, have been united with our Lord in his atoning work. We die, by faith with him, to this world and all its ways of thinking. Now we can seek to conform our thinking and behavior to Christ.

We can think in a cross-like way, a “cruciform” way. Then we will not boast of how we can manipulate other people. We will boast in the attitude of Christ, who died to set his people free from all kinds of bondage. We will not seek glory for ourselves, but for the Lord who willingly came down from above and lived among us; who willingly died in our place on the cross. We will point to Christ and his cross and say to anyone who will listen, “He is the Lord of lords, the most important figure in all of human history. His cross was the most important event that ever took place in the history of this world.” Eternal blessing comes only to those who take refuge in those truths.

Questions for discussion:

1. What problem arises when we just try to “get along” with everyone?
2. How is compromise with the world a failure to love?
3. What does it mean to boast in the cross of Christ?
4. What is meant by the term “alien” righteousness?

A NEW CREATION AND A NEW ISRAEL

For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. [6:15]

What really counts

It seems to be typical of “westerners,” of those who grow up in the culture of the “western” world, to make spiritual things a matter of outward observance. Whatever the cause, these “oriental” Judaizers had also done so. “Believe in Christ,” they said, (one wonders what they meant by “believe”) “but you must also be circumcised if you are to be saved.”

And, in the same way people think, “It is the act of baptism that brings salvation.” “Believe in Christ,” (or in the case of infants have someone else do it on your behalf), “but then you must be baptized because it is the outward and visible act that saves.”

Or, as is the case with so many in the evangelical world today, “walk down the aisle.” “Yes, you must believe in Christ, but you must also walk down the aisle and give the preacher your hand.” Many say I *went forward* to be saved. *Going forward* never saved anybody and baptism does not literally save anyone. There must be a work of God *on* and *in* the human heart. We must be born again. We must become new creatures. We cannot stay the same inside and come to know Christ. A completely new day must dawn.

What we are talking about is the work of the Spirit of God that makes us Christians, in truth. We do not become Christians because of what we do, whether it is going forward at the end of a worship service, or being baptized, or being confirmed. Salvation is of the Lord, and if we did not receive it from him we are not saved. He must intervene and awaken us to eternal life by his Spirit.

If he does not do this, we are still lost and in our sins. If God does not do his miracle of spiritual resurrection, we are still bound for a future judgement without the Lord’s grace and forgiveness. We are still without hope in this world.

The new birth is the great act of God that our Lord was talking about when he taught Nicodemus that we must be *born again* to see the kingdom of God.

The Israel of God

And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. [6:16]

Paul wishes God's peace and mercy for those who are faithful to the true gospel, but what an interesting phrase, "the Israel of God!" It may sound odd but it is a very useful expression. Not all those who were Israelites by ancestry were really true Jews. Only those whose hearts were right with God could be regarded as the true Israel of God. It is God who knows the heart. We can only judge the validity of someone's profession of faith in Christ by observing their behavior. But God sees what is in the heart.

We gather together as believers in Christ with other professing believers and in that way participate in the life of the visible church. But our congregations are not guaranteed purity of profession. There may be those who have never been born again, who for various motives join churches. They may believe that they are fulfilling some sort of moral duty. They may believe that they are going to meet people and have professional or political advancement because of their identification with the church. But they have never been converted. They do not know Christ.

God's congregation is not like that, however. It is the Israel of God. It is the church that is composed of only those who have been born again. They are trusting in Christ, and in his righteousness, to give them the status they need before God. Their motive for putting their faith in Christ alone arose out of their recognition of sin. They were seeking forgiveness and cleansing when they became God's own people by faith. No human being could have written their names down on that roll book. Only God could have done it.

Are you a part of the Israel of God? Do you have a living faith in Christ? Or, have you merely joined the church? Have you identified with God's people outwardly, without inward transformation? Remember that Paul has already said, *And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.* (3:29)

From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. [6:17]

In this passage, Paul was not referring to what came, in the middle ages, to be called the *stigmata*. He did not allude to a pathological condition that arises from a perverse mysticism. No, Paul had come to "share in the sufferings of Christ."

When Paul was seeking to extend the influence of the gospel in the region of the Galatians, a plot arose to stone the apostles. They escaped to Lystra but they were followed, and Paul was actually stoned and left for dead. He survived by God's grace. Paul himself had been beaten, imprisoned, gone hungry, had been

stoned as we have seen, and suffered many other difficulties for the cause of Christ.

Now he could look back on his faithful service to the Galatians. Paul had been willing to risk all in order to bring the truth about salvation to them. He had not failed to be a faithful pastor for their souls. He had been willing to suffer in order to make certain that they came to know Christ. He had worked to keep them from falling prey to theological scoundrels. He had preached the gospel truly, and he had defended it as well.

Now he could appeal to them, not to cause him to have such anguish for them. He could call on them to avoid error, to avoid denying the heart of the gospel, that Christ is all the salvation we need. "Don't trouble me, he said!"

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.
[6:18]

The letter to the Galatians was begun with the blessing of *grace*. (1:3) After all, this letter is the great defense of the gospel of *grace*. Paul's effort to set the Galatians right in their thinking about the nature of salvation was, from start to finish, a defense of the gospel against any teaching that would transform it into something other than the glorious proclamation of the *freeness* of God's gift of love in Christ. The false teachers who had given him such grief, and had led many astray, taught a grace denying doctrine of works. They hated the gospel of grace. They despised the teaching that God alone can save, and that God alone has saved.

Still Paul, for all the trouble that many of the Galatians had caused him, called them his *brothers*. He was still a pastor to them. He still cared about them. It was not that he merely wanted them to enjoy heaven one day. He was concerned about how they would be able to live life today. Would they allow themselves to be overcome by a legalistic spirit, with all of its deadening effect on their day to day lives? Would they forget that salvation by Christ sets us free from guilt, from anxiety over our eternal security, and from a slavish kind of life? Would they always be agonizing over whether they had found the will of God, as many do in our day? Would they be constantly suspicious that they had not received all that they were supposed to have in Christ, and that they must do something in order to make it so? Or, would they come to trust in Christ alone? Would they learn to live under the grace of God?

Notice that the apostle was not content to simply win them over in their thinking. He wanted to change their minds, but also wanted their spirits to be affected. He wanted the doctrine of God's grace to permeate their thinking.

Then he wanted them to move beyond a mere mental comprehension of this truth and come to live with, by, and in the spirit of grace.

This is freedom indeed. It is only when people receive this truth in a way that causes it to become a very part of their being that they manifest a new attitude toward the Lord, themselves, and others. Christ set us free by his death and resurrection. Now, we need to accept that truth and live in that freedom, until the time when he comes to take us home.

The Galatians had been in danger of believing that they must add a ritual requirement to their faith in Christ. Paul came to their theological rescue. He prayed that they might be people who know that God has saved them, without the involvement of any merit of their own. And, he prayed that they would come to live in the light of that truth.

Questions for discussion:

1. What does Paul mean by a new creation?
2. Does going forward in an evangelistic service have saving efficacy?
3. Does baptism have the power to take our sins away?
4. What is the Israel of God?
5. Why can the institutional church never be equated with the true church?

A FINAL WORD

The apostle Paul knew that to lose the battle for the gospel is to lose everything. And he knew that the stakes are very high indeed. Those who trust in themselves are sure to perish. Those who trust in Christ, plus themselves, will do the same. *Galatians* is the apostle's passionate plea for undeserving sinners to recognize that their only hope of salvation is in Christ *alone*.

Paul wanted the Galatians to hear the word that undercuts any pretense of

ability on our part. He wanted them to see that God has mercifully provided a way of escape, by sending his Son to die in the place of sinners. And he wanted those sinners to run for their eternal lives to Christ. He called upon them to depend on Jesus Christ, plus nothing.

We live in a day that is particularly open to the Galatian error, or some latter day version of it. Men and women are told to look inward and discover spiritual resources that lie dormant but may be enlivened by a correct attitude, or by ritual.

The apostles knew that to add anything to faith in Christ as the ground of our salvation is to miss the whole of the thing. They knew that the gospel is about what God has done in Christ and that it never was about us, or about what we might have the power or ability to do.

What is the true posture of your heart? Are you trusting Christ alone? Are you depending on what he accomplished by his atoning death, and by his resurrection from the dead? Or, do you still hold out hope that you, with Christ's help perhaps, but you, by your wisdom, righteousness, or pedigree should be regarded as right with God? That is a great error.

The true gospel causes us to look to Christ. The true gospel causes us to depend on him alone. That is what Paul knew. And so he said, *But if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.* It was true two thousand years ago, and it is still true today.