

LAW, LIBERTY, AND LIFE IN JESUS - Knowing How it all Works

Part one - Teaching #2129

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GETTING THE BIG PICTURE - BACKGROUND, CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW

This is a great letter to study. Along with Romans it forms the structure of everything important about your walk with Jesus. Today we're going to take a little time to get a perspective on the **background**, then the **context**, and then an **overview** of the letter of Paul to the Christians at Galatia:

1) THE BACKGROUND OF PAUL'S LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

Paul had evangelized the southern districts of Galatia and established congregations there on his first missionary journey as described in Acts chapters 13 and 14.

Upon his return to Jerusalem he heard the disturbing news that some Jewish Christian teachers had made their way into these new congregations and polluted the teaching Paul had left them standing firm in.

The central element in this false teaching was that these new Gentile Christians had to also be brought under the umbrella of Judaism if they were to truly be God's people. We'll study the details of this false teaching in a moment.

Before Paul left on his second missionary journey, and just before the famous Jerusalem Council mentioned in Acts chapter 15, Paul sent off his impassioned letter to the churches in the region of Galatia. This was around 47 to 49 A.D., making it one of the earliest New Testament documents.

2) THE CONTEXT OF THE LETTER

Context makes all the difference in the world when interpreting the Scriptures. We need to know the exact nature of the **problem** Paul was addressing if we're going to make proper **application** of the letter to our situation today.

The same instructions can mean very different things, depending on the **context** in which they are given. Let me illustrate what I mean: Imagine you are sitting in the family room at a nice summer cottage. You're almost asleep on the couch when you hear me out on the deck, in a rather dominant voice, saying, "**Go jump in the lake!**"

You know I've been involved in a long debate about some theological issue with another pastor, and naturally you assume that I've just lost my patience, don't want to engage in discussion anymore, and have just told my Christian brother to "**Go jump in the lake.**" You decide you need to pray for me more than you have been.

But in fact, something very different has just taken place. A teenage boy, who was just mowing the lawn, has accidentally disrupted a hornet's nest. The flying torturers are chasing him all over the yard, and then out onto the dock. Sensing the nearness of disaster I stop my discussion with my theological friend and scream out to the boy, ***“Go jump in the lake!”***

The very same words can take on an entirely different meaning. It's the ***context*** that determines the correct interpretation.

The book of Galatians has been used to address the issue of ***legalism*** in the church for years. People have used this letter to solve arguments over everything from lipstick, to smoking, to going to movies. But none of this even comes close to the issue Paul was addressing in this letter.

Paul was addressing a very different situation. He was writing this letter to set the church on guard against these Jewish teachers who were trying to tell these Christians that the era of the Mosaic law was still in force, and these new Christians had to recognize and participate in this Old Covenant era in order to become God's people.

By that I don't just mean that these teachers were trying to insist that people could only be saved by keeping the law perfectly. These Jews **knew** they couldn't keep the whole Mosaic law perfectly. The whole sacrificial system, and, for that matter, the very existence of the temple itself, was proof of their sinfulness. Why did they come over and over again throughout the whole Old Testament with their sacrifices if they thought they could keep the whole law perfectly?

No, the issue Paul was attacking was even bigger than this. The central point of conflict with these Jewish teachers was the **change that had come with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ**. These false teachers were proclaiming that the Jews were God's people in the sense that Jewishness set the terms of acceptance with God. In fact, one **had** to keep the covenant signs of the Jewish old covenant if he was to be one of God's people. And (this is the important part) the coming of Jesus Christ hadn't changed this central requirement.

That is why the particular laws of the Old Covenant that are dealt with specifically in this letter are the two laws **pertaining to the separateness of the Jews from the rest of the nations of the world**. The two dominant laws mentioned by these Jewish teachers, and refuted by Paul, are the laws regarding **circumcision** and **dietary regulations** (not just what foods were clean - kosher - or not, but also the regulations against sitting at table with Gentiles).

If you recall, this was the issue Paul had to stand up to Peter (and also Barnabas) about. Paul talks about this in this letter (**Galatians 2:11-14**). Peter, who knew better, who knew about God's saving grace in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus, began to withdraw from eating with the Gentiles. And so did Barnabas and others.

Now here's the question: ***Why does Paul care who Peter eats with?*** What is all the fuss about? And why does Paul take all the time to write about this incident to these Galatian Christians?

Because ***these two laws (circumcision and purity at keeping table) highlight the real concern of these false teachers.*** They were telling these new Christians that, in order for them to really be God's people, they also had to convert to nationalistic Judaism.

In other words, they would have to obey especially these two laws that ***mark off Jews as distinct from Gentiles.*** Christ's death on the cross wasn't enough by itself to make Gentiles God's people. They had to come under the umbrella of the Jewish old covenant.

They were teaching that it was fine, and probably even good, to acknowledge Jesus Christ. They weren't against these Christians, *per se*. But this experience with Jesus and the life of the Spirit was only the beginning. These new Christians, it was being taught, needed to have their new faith supplemented and ***perfected*** by coming under the religious umbrella of Judaism.

It would be like telling a new convert at a Billy Graham crusade that he had to become a Lutheran, or Baptist, or Pentecostal in order to get to heaven. Whenever this type of thing happens the gospel is fundamentally compromised. The message shifts from ***“come to Jesus Christ”*** to ***“come and join our group.”***

Paul's response is resoundingly clear. Neither Judaism nor any other religious system can be added to supplement the effectiveness of Christ's atoning work on the Cross. This is the issue Paul is confronting in this letter - **Galatians 3:3 - “Are you so foolish? After**

beginning by the Spirit, are you now finishing by the flesh?” -

IPAD TEXT

Paul used that term “**flesh**” in slightly different ways in his letters. In this verse in Galatians flesh doesn’t mean **wicked** or **morally depraved**. Paul is talking about religious systems here. He means **flesh** and opposed to the **inward transforming life of the Holy Spirit**. Flesh means any attempt to live life, even a godly life, apart from the inward life of **Christ**.

So Judaism was not required as a “**perfecting**” or “**completing**” of their faith in Christ. If you try to **add** Judaism to the work of Christ for salvation you totally wipe out the effectiveness of the Cross -

Galatians 2:21 - “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.” - IPAD TEXT

And Paul still can’t stop himself - **Galatians 3:19 - “Why, then, was the law given? It was added for the sake of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise was made would come. The law was put into effect through angels by means of a mediator.” - IPAD TEXT.**

He points out what these Judaisers were neglecting. That is, that the era of the Old Testament law was for a limited **purpose** (to reveal sin) and for a limited **time** (until Christ came)

So we need to frame the context of Paul's words to the Galatians carefully. Paul is fighting a very specific **kind** of legalism. He's protecting the very core of Christianity.

We tend to use the term "**legalism**" far too loosely today. I've heard people use verses from the book of Galatians whenever anyone tried to advance a careful separation from the world - "**Don't be so legalistic! I can live with so and so even though we're not married. I can watch movies that used to be considered pornographic. I can establish relationships with an unsaved boyfriend or girlfriend.**" etc, etc. And then they will rip some verse out of Galatians about not being under the Law and being free in the liberty of the Spirit.

Listen, this is miles removed from the kind of legalism Paul was writing about in his letter to the Galatians. In fact, Paul wasn't against giving Christians very detailed, specific instructions on the kind of separation he wanted to see them demonstrate from the world. **Paul frequently used lists of do's and don'ts.** Paul would probably find today's church very worldly and morally lax and indifferent. **He wouldn't even relate to the way most of us scream legalism whenever pressed into the specifics of holiness.**

But there was a very specific type of legalism Paul would confront to his death. Christ couldn't be mixed with other faiths. Salvation couldn't be beefed up or perfected with the compulsory addition of any other religious system. The new covenant is totally new and complete. IT replaces anything preceding and condemns anything added. It can never be mixed with anything else.

3) **A QUICK OVERVIEW OF THE STRUCTURE OF THE LETTER**

For simplicity, the book can be roughly divided up into three sections:

- a) ***The first two chapters deal with the all important issue of truth and authority in the Christian faith.*** It's significant that Paul lays these issues down at the very beginning. After all, most of the first Christians were converts from ***other*** religions.

Why should they change? What was so special - so important - about the Christian message that their old religion was no longer good enough?

This is an increasingly important topic as our world gets increasingly pluralistic. Today both Paul and Jesus would be banned from FaceBook for their exclusive views on the finality of divine revelation and the finished work of Christ. We need to think this through. And Paul can be of great help.

b) ***The second two chapters deal with the nature of salvation.***

This too is a subject of great relevance. How are people made right with God? What is the role of good deeds in getting to heaven? Do we have to be holy? And if we must, what happens to salvation by grace along through faith alone?

It is in the middle two chapters of the letter that Paul gets down to the issues behind the teaching of the Judaisers. This is where Paul explains the nature and purpose of the Mosaic Law, the Old Testament sacrifices, and the nature of true saving faith. Christians need to have a clear understanding of these issues today.

c) ***The final two chapters of the letter deal with the all important subject of Christian holiness.*** Once one is saved, how does one grow in holiness? If works don't save, why are they so important ***after*** one is saved? What is the relationship of the Christian to the Ten Commandments ***after*** conversion?

These are tricky chapters. But these are some of Paul's finest words on the cultivation of the life of the Holy Spirit and the ongoing growth of the fruit of righteousness in our hearts. His ultimate conclusion is desperately needed in the church today: The life of the Spirit is ***freedom from sin***, not ***freedom to sin***.

These final two chapters explain how to make this process a reality in our hearts, not just a wish.

Next week we'll launch into the first five verses of this great letter!