

“TWO MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE APPROACHES TO SALVATION”

As we move into the fifth chapter of Galatians tonight, we are moving from the doctrinal section of the letter to the ethical section. In chapters 3-4, Paul was focused upon telling the Galatians what they should, and should not, believe. In chapters 5-6, he is going to focus upon telling them how they should, and should not, live. There is a transition here from matters of doctrine to matters of practice. You probably noticed, though, that this passage contains many of the same themes that Paul has already raised in the letter. Once again, he focuses upon the incompatibility between the law and faith. Yet Paul is beginning to discuss the ethics of the Christian life, as we can see by his use of the phrase “faith working through love” in verse 6. The fact that Paul continues to contrast the law and faith as he begins his discussion of Christian ethics tells us something that is very important. It shows us that holiness of life does not come by works of the law any more than justification does. Both are part of the same salvation, a salvation that is by grace and through faith from beginning to end. *In this passage, Paul wants us to see that legalism and the gospel are two mutually exclusive approaches to meeting the demands that are set forth in God’s law.* You cannot cling to Christ and to your works. It is either the one or the other.

Our passage begins with what James Boice calls “the key verse in the entire Epistle” [486]: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” In Christ we have true freedom. We are no longer

bound to keep the law in order to obtain God's blessing. This is why it was utter foolishness for the Galatians to submit again to the law's yoke of slavery.

We see something significant when we look at the different ways the term "yoke" is used in the New Testament. In the only other passage where "yoke" is used in relation to the law, it is used in a negative sense. This is in Acts 15, where Peter asks this question of those who wanted to make Gentile Christians submit to circumcision: "why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?" [v. 10] In that passage, the yoke is clearly something negative. It is something that we cannot bear. But in the only other metaphorical use of "yoke" in the New Testament, the term is used in a positive sense. It is found in Matthew 11, where Jesus speaks these words to his followers: "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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." [vv. 29-30] You can see the contrast. The law's yoke is unbearable, but Jesus' yoke is easy. Both passages use the image of a yoke as a metaphor for living under God's rule, but they are talking about it in completely different senses. The yoke of the law is a yoke of slavery, and this is because the law, though it is holy and righteous, does not give us the ability to fulfill its demands. But the yoke of Christ is easy and light, not because God's requirements have been lessened in any way, but because Christ has fully met those requirements for us. And when we are united to Christ by faith, we are given a new nature, so that we may serve the Lord out of gratitude and joy, not because of the oppressive obligation that the law

places upon us. In Christ we are set free from slavery to the law so that the law might serve as our rule of life.

One other thing to note about verse 1 is that Paul warns the Galatians, who were Gentiles, not to “submit again” to the yoke of the law. This is noteworthy because, as Gentiles, they were not under the Mosaic law prior to their conversion. So how can Paul talk about their submitting to it “again”? This reminds us of what Paul said back in chapter 4 about how the Mosaic law and pagan religions are established upon the same foundation, the “elementary principles of the world.” [see Gal. 4:3, 9] Paul tells us that the law of Moses had the same kind of enslaving works-principle that was at the basis of the pagan religions from which the Galatian Christians had converted. In the words of New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce, both the Jews under the Mosaic law and the Gentiles under their pagan religions were “under legalism as a principle of life.” This is why Paul can say that if the Galatians were to turn to the law of Moses after having received Christ, it would be the same thing as if they went back to the works-oriented mindset of their old life in paganism. The works-principle that was present in the law of Moses was intended to show God’s people the hopelessness of their sinful condition and thus cause them to see their need for Christ. Therefore, as David VanDrunen writes,

“Where the law is chosen over against Christ after his coming (the scenario described in Galatians 5:1-4), then only the naked works principle remains, shorn

of its typological (and thus ultimately redemptive) purpose.” [*The Law Is Not of Faith*, 311]

This is why Paul says so emphatically that there is nothing to be gained by going back to the law.

And not only is there nothing to be gained; there is everything to lose. This is what Paul says in verses 2-6. Going back to the law will cause the Galatians to lose what only Christ can provide for them. Christ will be of no advantage to them if they accept circumcision. Now why would Paul say this? He said it because, by going back to the law, the Galatians were saying that Christ was not enough for them. They thought they needed to add their works on top of Christ’s work in order to receive God’s blessing. And the problem with this mindset is that Christ will either be a whole Savior or no Savior at all. In the words of Philip Ryken:

“If we will not let Christ do everything for us, he can do nothing for us, at least as far as our justification is concerned. If we try to help ourselves, Christ will be no help at all.” [Galatians, 199]

By going back to the law, the Galatians were saying that there was something that they needed to do in order to be accepted by God. They were placing themselves under the

yoke of the law again. They were obligating themselves to keep the whole law for their justification, an obligation from which Christ sets us free.

You probably noticed that Paul uses strong language at a number of points in this passage. The word “Look” at the beginning of verse 2 sounds a note of alarm. The statement made in verse 12 shows us Paul’s righteous indignation over the fact that the Judaizers were turning people away from the true gospel. And the things that Paul says in verse 4 show us why he took this matter so seriously. If the Galatians accept the teaching of the Judaizers, they will be severed from Christ; they will fall away from grace. Grace and legalism are completely incompatible with one another. If you trust in your works at all, you are not trusting in Christ alone for your salvation. Either Christ alone will justify you, or you will have to meet all the requirements of the law yourself. You cannot have it both ways.

Set in contrast to those who attempt to obtain justification by the law are those who look to Christ for their righteousness. This is what Paul is talking about in verse 5. Through the Spirit, who works saving faith in our hearts, we wait for the hope of righteousness. All of our righteousness – the imputed righteousness of justification and the imparted righteousness of sanctification – comes from Christ.

Paul then says something a bit surprising in verse 6. He says, “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything.” Circumcision itself is not the problem. And there is nothing inherently good about uncircumcision either. Now that Christ has come, circumcision is a matter of indifference. This is why, on one occasion,

Paul was willing to have his associate Timothy circumcised. He was willing to do it in that instance because no one was telling Timothy that he had to be circumcised in order to be accepted by God. Paul simply saw it as a way to remove any potential barriers with Jews that they might encounter on their upcoming missionary journey. Circumcision itself is a matter of indifference. The identifying mark of the Christian is neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, but faith working through love.

This is an interesting phrase, isn't it: "Faith working through love." It tells us something about the nature of the faith that the Spirit of God works in the hearts of the elect. The Reformers often expressed this truth by saying that, while we are justified by faith alone, the faith that justifies is never alone. Genuine faith is always expressed in love for God and other people. True faith produces self-denying acts of love done for others. The gospel does not say that works are unnecessary. As the letter of James tells us, faith without works is dead. A fruitless faith is not a Spirit-worked faith.

At the same time, it is crucial that we understand that our good works are done as a result of our salvation, not in order to obtain salvation. This is the difference between the gospel and legalism. This distinction is expressed so well in these words from Walter Marshall:

“[B]elievers should not act *for* life, but *from* life. They must act as those that are not procuring life by their works, but as such who have already received and

derived life from Christ, and act from the power and virtue received from him.” [*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, 172]

Believers in Jesus Christ do their works of love by virtue of the blessing of life that we have in Christ, not as a way to try to obtain this blessing.

In the second half of our passage, verses 7-12, Paul shows the contrast between himself and the Judaizers. He wants the Galatians to see that, by listening to the Judaizers, they have turned away from the pure gospel. Any teaching that says that salvation is by works, to any degree at all, is a teaching that does not come from God. Perhaps the Galatians would have been tempted to respond to Paul by saying that he was making too big of a deal out of this. Was it really all that important whether they were circumcised or not? ‘Come on Paul,’ we can almost hear them say, ‘you don’t really think that getting circumcised is going to cut us off from Christ.’ We hear people saying similar kinds of things today – ‘Do we really have to make such a big deal about insisting that Jesus is the *only* way of salvation? Is it absolutely necessary to affirm that justification is by faith *alone*? Do we have to believe that God is *entirely* sovereign in the salvation of his people? Can’t we just focus on our broad areas of agreement with other branches of the church?’ This is what many people seem to think. But listen to what Paul has to say about this: “A little leaven leavens the whole lump.” Like yeast in a batch of dough, a little bit of theological error spreads and infects the whole gospel. This

is the reason why Paul can say so confidently that the Galatians would be severed from Christ if they accepted the false gospel of the Judaizers.

And take note of what Paul says about these false teachers in verse 10: “the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is.” A day will come when false teachers will have to answer for the falsehoods that they have taught.

Unlike the Judaizers, Paul was not preaching circumcision. And this resulted in persecution for him. It would have been easier for him to preach the message that people wanted to hear. But as Christ’s apostle he could only preach the message that had been given to him. And that message, the message of the gospel, is offensive to the ears of fallen man. The cross of Christ is offensive to our sense that we can somehow do something to earn favor from God. The cross exposes our utter poverty of spirit.

The fundamental problem with a legalistic approach to salvation is that it does not see the extent of our corruption. It fails to reckon with the utter sinfulness of sin. Those who trust in their works, to any degree, have no concept of how much God hates sin. As Robert Murray M’Cheyne writes,

“Wherever God sees sin he will punish it. He punished it in the rebellious angels – in Adam – in the old world – in Sodom; and when he saw sins laid on Christ, he forsook his own Son. You think nothing of sin. See what God thinks of it. If so much as one sin be upon you uncovered, you cannot be saved.” [*Sermons*, 48-9]

This is why Paul was so serious in dealing with the threat that was being posed by these false teachers. If you rely upon your works at all when it comes to your standing before God, then you are obligated to keep the entire law. And you will not be able to do it. You will fail spectacularly. But if you place your trust in Christ, and in him alone, for your salvation, then you are set free from the demands of the law. You have been released from the yoke of slavery. Christ has fulfilled all the requirements of the law in your stead, and he has born the curse of the law in his death on the cross. And now you are free to take Christ's yoke upon you, a yoke that is easy and light. You have been set free to serve the Lord in freedom, expressing your faith in deeds of love.