

Commentary on Galatians

Paula Fether, 2006

Chapter One

Paul begins by giving some of his credentials as a hand-picked apostle of Jesus Christ. He also includes greetings from others with him and praises God for the sacrifice Jesus made to rescue us all from "this evil age". But no sooner is the greeting given than he cuts to the chase and confronts the Galatians over their amazingly quick abandonment of the true gospel of grace for "a different gospel", one which would again enslave them to a religion of salvation by good deeds. He strongly condemns any who preach such a distorted gospel and rob believers of their freedom.

He again reminds them of the fact that he got the gospel directly by revelation from Jesus Himself, not from anyone else, not even the other apostles before him. He relates how formerly he had been Christianity's bitterest enemy, hounding and persecuting the believers, even having some put to death, thinking he was just being a good Jew (actually, an outstanding Jew, as he had surpassed his peers among the Pharisees). He was stopped cold by Jesus, after which he went away alone for three years. Only then did he meet with the others in Jerusalem, where he was acknowledged by the church leaders as having received a commission from God.

Chapter Two

A mere fourteen years later, the church was already being infiltrated by "false brothers" who were trying to enslave the believers with laws and rules. By this time Paul's authority had been recognized by all the believers, as shown in the confrontation with Peter over this issue. Peter had allowed the pressure of the false teachers to cause him to slide back into Jewish legalism, and Paul had to publicly rebuke him! This is significant on two levels: Paul had the authority to rebuke an apostle that had been with Jesus during His time as a human, and the rebuke was public, something that is not tolerated in churches today.

Verses 20-21 really belong with the next chapter, because they begin Paul's dissertation on the absurdity of trying to go back under the Law, as many Christians preach today. It's well worth repeating:

I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside God's grace, because if righteousness could come through the law, then Christ died for nothing!

Chapter Three

For the life of me I cannot fathom why people would prefer to try and earn that which is available for free! And this is exactly what Paul is saying as he continues his grilling of the Galatians over their desire to do exactly that:

3:1 You foolish Galatians! Who has cast a spell on you? Before your eyes Jesus Christ was vividly portrayed as crucified! 3:2 The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? 3:3 Are you so foolish? Although you began with the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by human effort? 3:4 Have you suffered so many things for nothing? —if indeed it was for nothing. 3:5 Does God then give you the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law or by your believing what you heard?

I can almost see Paul pulling out his hair as he writes this. He goes on to explain that if anyone wants to keep the law, they have to keep *all* of it. You can't keep most of it; it's all or nothing. But that's what Christians today try to do, isn't it. They say "You don't have to make animal sacrifices, but you must keep the Sabbath (and whatever else I personally feel everyone should do)".

The rest of the chapter is Paul's example from common legal principles showing how laws and contracts work, and why the Law was not a savior but a prison, a guardian, that was never meant to be permanent. Those of us who live by faith in Jesus are "heirs of the promise", freed from the Law completely and eternally.

Chapter Four

Continuing the legal illustration, Paul again asks the Galatians how they can want to turn from this freedom back to "the weak and worthless basic forces". (Some commentators take that unusual phrase to refer to the ancient Babylonian practice of astrology, with its supernatural "elements" and principles, and I think they make some good arguments to back up their view.) Yet isn't that what is going on in churches today? Twelve Step programs, breath prayer, "the silence", chanting, etc.; they're subtle but deadly.

Paul then discusses the motivation of the false teachers: to gather a following without the persecution that goes with faithfulness to the gospel of freedom. Then he returns to more illustrations of the Law through the example of Abraham and his two sons. I've actually seen some writers claim that because two covenants are represented here, that these people never actually lived! But I'll say the obvious just in case: actual people can be used as examples. Got that?

Chapter Five

Back to the rhetorical questions about the uselessness of legalism, and in verse 12 Paul gets downright crude: he wishes that the people pushing the legal practice of circumcision would just cut the whole thing off! This forcefully sums up what he's been saying all along about having to keep *all* the law if you keep any of it.

But after all this effort at driving home the point that we are free, Paul puts it in balance by reminding the Galatians that freedom is not license, as he also wrote to the Romans. Our freedom is *from* sin, not *to* sin. We are free from the prison of the Law, but should we then spit in the face of the One that bought our freedom? That's what Paul is saying about the new "law" of love in Christ; we are now free, but we are also indebted to the blood of Jesus that bought us. We no longer desire those things that would grieve the One we claim to love.

Paul speaks a little about the kinds of "fruit" one would expect from a believer as a result of our freedom from the Law, but notice that he is talking to believers, not unbelievers. He is indirectly saying that believers can and do backslide. Nowhere is it even hinted that such behavior equates to a loss of salvation, but only a loss of reward. (Not inheriting "the kingdom of God" does not refer to salvation but a loss of what could have been ours.)

Chapter Six

Paul, as was his custom, signs off with some general instructions and advice but gets in one last jab at the legalizers. Clearly, anyone who thinks Paul twisted the teachings of Jesus or made up his own religion of do's and don'ts has never read this letter to the Galatians! Don't let legalizers or unbelievers rob you of your freedom in Christ.