

Galatians

Introduction

Gospel or Law? Faith or works? These are key questions in the life of every Christian. In the book of Galatians, we are assured that keeping the law, even the Ten Commandments, cannot save us from our sins. Instead, we find freedom and salvation through placing our faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Background

Galatians was written about 49 A.D. from Antioch. This letter was written to churches in southern Galatia in the first century but was included in the Bible for the instruction of all Christians. Paul wrote the letter to disprove the claims of the Judaizers, who said Christians must follow the Jewish laws, including circumcision, to be saved. Galatia was a province in the Roman Empire, in central Asia Minor. It included Christian churches in the cities of Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.

Purpose

The Epistle to the Galatians was the battle cry of the Reformation because it stands out as Paul's *Manifesto of Justification by Faith*. It has therefore been dubbed as "the charter of Christian Liberty." Luther considered it in a peculiar sense his Epistle.⁵¹ Galatians stands as a powerful polemic against the Judaizers and their teachings of legalism. They taught, among other things, that a number of the ceremonial practices of the Old Testament were still binding on the church. Thus, the apostle writes to refute their false gospel of works and demonstrates the superiority of justification by faith and sanctification by the Holy Spirit versus by the works of the Law.

In addition, these Judaizers not only proclaimed a false gospel, but sought to discredit Paul's apostleship. In the first two chapters Paul vindicated his apostleship and message. In these two chapters Paul demonstrated convincingly that his apostleship and his message came by revelation from the risen Christ. Then, in chapters 3 and 4 he contended for the true doctrine of grace, the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Some, however, would immediately claim such a doctrine leads to license, so the apostle demonstrates that Christian liberty does not mean license. Thus, chapters 5 and 6 show that Christians must learn to live by the power of the Spirit and that the Spirit controlled walk will manifest not the works of the flesh but rather the fruit of the Spirit.

Highlights

Keeping the law does not save us. Paul countered the claims of Jewish teachers that we need to obey the law in addition to faith in Christ. The law serves to reveal our inadequacy to obey.

Faith in Jesus Christ alone saves us from our sins. Salvation is a gift from God, Paul taught. We cannot earn righteousness through works or good behavior. Belief in Christ is the only way to become accepted by God.

True freedom comes from the gospel, not from legalism. Christ instituted a new covenant, freeing his followers from the bondage of Jewish law and tradition.

Summary

In chapters 1-2, Paul's gives his testimony about how he had received the authentic Gospel message. He warns that if anyone presents another Gospel message other than the one he was preaching, that person is *"As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!"* (1:9). Paul was speaking of the one true Gospel that he had received; Please read 1st Corinthians 15:1-4.

Paul then declares that Christ now lives within him, and directs, and empowers him to live as Christ's ambassador and instrument: *"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me"* (2:20).

Chapters 3-5:12, Paul begins by declaring that salvation is through faith and trust in Jesus Christ "Alone", and cannot be obtained through the keeping of the Law. *"Fou foolish Galatians! Who put you under a spell? Was not Jesus the Messiah clearly portrayed before your very eyes as having been crucified? I want to learn only one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started out with the Spirit, are you now ending up with the flesh?"* (Galatians 3:1-3). The Law (10 Commandments) is our tutor to lead us to salvation in Jesus Christ, *"the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith"* (3:24). No one can obey the 10 Commandments. It is impossible. Every person has broken them; therefore, we can only attain salvation through trusting in our Savior Christ Jesus.

Chapters 5:13-6, He teaches the Fruits of the Spirit and tells us to *"walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh"* (5:16). Good works does not save, but a Christian must have the desire to produce good fruit, obey God's Law and live a holy and righteous life in the eyes of God. Christians should live this redeemed life.

Key Words:

The phrases "justification by faith" and "freedom from the Law" form the key words of the epistle.

Key Verses

- 2:20-21. 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. 2:21 I do not set aside God's grace, because if righteousness could come through the law, then Christ died for nothing!
- 5:1. For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not be subject again to the yoke of slavery.
- 5:13-16. For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity to indulge your flesh, but through love serve one another. 5:14 For the whole law can be summed up in a single commandment, namely, "**You must love your neighbor as yourself.**" However, if you continually bite and devour one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another. 5:16 But I say, live by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh.

Key Chapter

The fact that believers are not under the Law in no way means the freedom to do as one pleases, but the power to do what we should by God's grace through the Spirit. In this sense, chapter 5 is a key chapter. Our freedom must never be used "as an opportunity to indulge the flesh" but rather as a basis for loving one another by walking in the strength of the Spirit (5:13, 16, 22-25).

Commentary

Paul saw grace being trampled underfoot by the Galatians and to a certain extent, this is happening today in many Christian circles. Since the Galatians knew that they were not saved by works, they equated this freedom as a license to sin. It is true that salvation is by grace alone, found in faith alone, from Christ alone and believers are not saved by works; they are saved for works. Even so, Paul still reminded the church that salvation is not from any works of the law but from Christ's own redemptive work. They went from one extreme; works based salvation, to another; using grace as a license to not worry about doing any good works at all.

This works-based salvation was brought in by the traditional Jews who thought that the Galatians largely Gentiles, should be circumcised and not base their salvation on Jesus Christ alone. Certain Jewish groups were still trying to convert the Gentiles into the Jewish customs which were becoming points of agitation with Paul since Jesus Christ is the One and only way to salvation.

The first thing Paul did was to vindicate the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ alone. To gain salvation by the Mosaic Law meant that Christ died for nothing. Even the Holy Spirit came as a free gift to the church at Galatia. The Holy Spirit and Jesus' death were both unmerited by works.

He kept reminding them that the works of the Law cannot help sanctify a believer nor was it of any help toward their ongoing sanctification. Even miracles are not a result of law keeping but by divine power alone and unmerited.

Another way was to remind them of Abraham's example of faith and not of works of the Law. Abraham had saving faith long before any Mosaic Law ever existed. Saving faith is a provision of God and not of man. Besides the Law brought a curse upon any who could not keep it and no human could ever keep it perfectly. Only Jesus Christ fulfilled the Law in a perfect way. The idea that human performance could help acquire salvation was shattered in the Old Testament and only served to condemn men and that throwing themselves upon the mercy of God in faith was the only means possible.

Another way that Paul mentioned was that Christ's work is the only work that can save a person and no person's own work can ever save them since our best efforts are like filthy rags before a holy God. The curse of the Law brought death but Christ became a curse for our sake. The curse was borne by Christ instead of believers or in place of the believers.

Another way Paul tried to make the Galatians understand this point was to understand the purpose of the Law. The Law would never be permanent since it was intended to serve the people only until the Promised Messiah (the Seed) would come. The Law was never intended to bring eternal life or an eternal promise in faith. Even the old sacrifices could never permanently leave the people free from the penalty of sin. The Law held captive all the world and only Christ and faith in Him could set the believer free from this curse. The Law was intended to be the schoolmaster and disciplinarian until Christ could justify us by His sacrifice and by faith. If they want to start keeping the Mosaic Law they would have to keep the whole Law which is associated with its curse if kept imperfectly. Paul asks them if salvation is by grace or by works? If it is works, Paul tells them clearly that they've fallen from grace

Finally our incorporation into God's family came after we were children and grown up into Christ and baptized into Him. When we reached this relationship, being clothed in Christ, we had the full standing of being justified before the Father and we were then incorporated into His family. If we are believers in Christ, God sees us as Abraham's seed (Galatians 3:29). Abraham's faith was a saving faith. Abraham's faith came before the Law was established. Legalism and grace do not mix. The cross put an end to the Old Covenant works and the obligatory rituals, washings, and sacrifices so it made no sense to keep pursuing righteousness through works of the Law.

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