

Shepherding Notes

Galatians

By Mike Neglia

Overview

The apostle Paul, in writing to the group of churches that he founded in the Roman province of Galatia (modern day Turkey), wastes no time in presenting his case: There is only one true gospel of grace; if anything is added to it, it ceases to be the true gospel of grace — period.

Authentic Apostle

Paul was called by the risen Christ Himself to be an apostle. Not simply a pastor, or preacher, or teacher, or evangelist, or missionary — but one of the elite group of men known as the apostles. The eleven disciples from the gospels plus Judas' replacement in the book of Acts make up what is known as the Twelve. Paul on the road to Damascus was supernaturally arrested by Jesus and pressed into His service. The religious sect that Paul, as a Pharisee, was seeking to destroy was the very sect that he would be called to spread, defend, suffer for, and ultimately be martyred for. In the churches of Galatia, apparently his authority as an apostle was being called into question. Paul wastes no time in clarifying the fact that he was not appointed as an apostle by any mere man, but by Jesus Christ Himself — and at a time after He had already been raised from the dead and ascended into heaven. This was a miraculous encounter.

Message > Messenger

Without getting into any specifics here, Paul expresses his utter disbelief that the believers in the Galatian churches were very quickly and easily abandoning the pure gospel of Jesus Christ and entertaining erroneous teachings coming from other professing believers. We will discover in the following chapters that a group of supposed believers were instructing the Galatians to return to the Old Testament Law in order to be saved. These men were teaching that Gentile believers needed to become Jewish in order to be children of God.

Here in chapter 1, Paul simply stresses the fact that if a teaching does not strictly adhere to the apostolic teaching that salvation is by the grace of Jesus Christ alone, then that teaching is not only different from the gospel — it is an anti-gospel. In order to convey the utmost importance of the truth of the gospel, he proposes that even if an apostle (including himself) would dare to teach salvation by any means other than by God's grace

through faith in Jesus Christ, that man ought to be damned to hell. Furthermore, Paul even takes this to the extreme and says that even if an angel came down from heaven and preached another gospel, that angel should also be damned.

"It does not matter who comes, or with what supposed authority, or with what persuasive arguments – if the heart of their message adds to or takes from the pure gospel, it is not only to be avoided, it is to be actively condemned."

Credible Credentials

Next, Paul reminds the churches that he was once zealously opposed to Christianity. Humanly speaking, he did enormous damage to the growing church. He was a violent persecutor of believers in Christ and, by default, a persecutor of Christ Himself. Nevertheless, by the sovereign plan of God, the trajectory that Paul had set his life upon was reversed and he was put on the path chosen for him since before he was even born. This new life was not only for the salvation of his own soul, but for the salvation of countless believers to follow. Specifically during his lifetime it was his ministry to the Gentiles, but it extends to all who have read his New Testament letters in the past 2000 years. Millions have been benefited by his Holy Spirit-inspired teaching.

Supernatural Schooling

In order to confirm his assertion that his authority as an apostle came not from men but from God Himself, Paul states that after his conversion he did not go to Jerusalem to meet the Twelve, but instead went by himself to Arabia for three years. It was here that he was supernaturally instructed and trained by the Lord Himself. It is very possible that in 2 Corinthians chapter 12, Paul's description of a man being brought up to the third heaven was his poetic allusion to this very event. So the truth of the gospel, as well as being set apart as the apostle to the Gentiles, was not taught to him or bestowed upon him by Peter, John, James, or any other apostle. Everything he received – salvation, mission, and authority – was granted to him directly by Jesus Christ Himself.

Summary

Although there are no apostles alive today, men who are in authority to preach and teach the Word of God have this authority only insofar as they accurately divide the word of truth. In other words, it does not matter who the man is in and of himself, or what church or denomination ordained him to the ministry — rather it is his message that is of supreme importance. And this message must be centered around the unadulterated truth of the gospel of grace: that human beings are bound in sin, they cannot of their own accord or by their own works please God and save themselves. They need the grace of God to grant them the faith to believe in the finished work of Jesus Christ on their behalf — and only the finished work of Jesus Christ on their behalf. They can do nothing to add to their salvation. Once anyone begins to add to it, it negates the entire thing. Let's keep this in mind as we move onto chapter 2 tomorrow.

Overview

In chapter 1, Paul reminded the Galatians of his former ultra-zealous Jewish days in which he violently persecuted the church of Christ. He then recounts his call and the wonderful salvation he received on the Damascus road, and then through his time alone in Arabia. In chapter 2, Paul continues informing the churches of his 15-day stay with Peter in Jerusalem — where he also got to know James — and onto his 14 years of ministry, to his return to Jerusalem where he faced opposition from what he calls "false brethren," and also his call to be a minister of the gospel to the Gentiles.

Peter's Problem

Now in chapter 2, he is ministering with Barnabas in Antioch, which was the first Gentile Christian church. It is here where he has his legendary confrontation with the apostle Peter. Galatians 2:11 tells us that when Peter comes to Antioch, he avoids the Gentiles and eats with the Jews only. Paul tells us that Peter feared the party of the circumcision. Apparently Peter once understood that there was no difference between Jew and Gentile in the gospel — and he acted according to that knowledge. In fact, Peter taught on that very topic. When he had a vision from God telling him that Gentiles are going to be saved and there is to be no wall of division between them and Jewish Christians — Peter even witnessed Gentiles being filled with the Holy Spirit at Caesarea, praising God and being saved. For some reason, Peter lost his courage, played the hypocrite, and avoided the Gentile believers at Antioch.

Paul's Pronouncement

Paul, becoming aware of Peter's hypocrisy, opposed him to his face in front of everyone, telling him that he was in the wrong. Paul accused him of living like a Gentile (which isn't negative in Paul's eyes), but at the same time expecting the Gentiles to behave like Jews — namely, to be circumcised and to keep the kosher food laws. Paul then uses that as a springboard to review the truth of the gospel.

Graceful Gospel

VS. 15–21

Beginning in verse 15, Paul emphatically states:

"...yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through 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."

It is difficult for me to expound on so clear a presentation of the gospel of grace. Man, in and of himself, is unable to please God and to save himself. Even the God-given Law of the Old Testament is unable to save. The Law was God's righteous instructions for His people, for His glory, and for their good. His Law is perfect. The problem is with us — we are sinful and unable to keep it. Jesus was the only Man in history to keep God's Law perfectly. This is why His sacrifice on behalf of sinners was acceptable to His Father. Jesus Christ was truly blameless. Therefore, in the Old Covenant, salvation was always and ever by grace. The Old Covenant pointed to the New Covenant, which is perfect in Jesus Christ. Next in verses 20–21 he proclaims:

"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. 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 righteousness were through the Law, then Christ died for no purpose."

"If we could become righteous through the Law without Christ, then Jesus died for nothing. Let that sink in — if we could just do it ourselves without Him, there was no reason for Him to come and die."

Summary

Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Any works added on top of it in order to secure it denies it all. Although good works are necessary — as we were made for good works and good works are evidence of God's saving grace in our lives — they are not the cause of our salvation. Brothers and sisters, Paul accused Peter to his face in front of everybody because his sin was so obvious and his actions were conveying a false gospel. Even if Peter was not doing this intentionally, that was what was being broadcast to both Jew and Gentile alike. Paul had the duty to correct Peter and point this out to all who were being affected by his behavior. When we correct our brothers or sisters who are in sin, we do it privately — however, if the sin is in effect tearing down the gospel message, it may very well be necessary to correct them in front of all. However, let

me caution you in this way: we are not apostles, we are not infallible, we are not commanded to go around and point out the sin of every brother and sister we see. If we believe that a brother or sister is in sin, specifically a sin that clouds the truth of the gospel, let us humbly and fearfully go to the person privately first. Let us state our case and then if they will not listen, let us involve more mature Christians. Our goal should never be to win an argument or to look right in front of a group of people, or to embarrass a brother or sister. The result of us correcting another is primarily for God's glory, and secondarily, for their good and the good of the church.

Overview

Paul here in chapter 3 wastes no time in pressing his argument regarding the glorious gospel of grace versus man's feeble attempts to keep the Mosaic Law.

Foolish or Faithful?

Usually, it's not wise to insult someone that you are trying to counsel or convince of something. Who among us would call up a brother or sister and say, "Hello, stupid," before stating your case? Here in the beginning of chapter 3, Paul expresses his amazement at the fact that people who professed to truly believe in the saving work of Jesus Christ could be so easily tricked! He first addresses the Person of the Holy Spirit who seals God's elect until the day of redemption. Everything that Paul mentions here regarding the Spirit demonstrates the fact that everything that the Galatians have received — everything that they've accomplished — has been the result of God's gracious gifts to them. The faith that they had exercised had been a gift in the first place, and then every subsequent blessing and enablement has been in accordance with their faith, trust, and reliance upon God. Paul brings up Abraham, who is the father of all of the faithful. He recounts Abraham's faith and then the promise that God made to him about all of the families of the earth being blessed through him. Paul points out the fact that even before Abraham would believe, that God's will was that his faith would extend even as far as the salvation of the Gentiles centuries later.

Redeemed & Righteous

According to Warren Wiersbe, "the flesh loves to do things religious — celebrate holy days, practice rituals, attempt to do good works for God." At first glance, this seems to be counterintuitive — but in reflecting upon our own lives, as well as following Paul's argument here, the truth is starkly clear. Man seeks to earn God's favor by performing religious duties. It makes us feel good. It makes us feel like we are accomplishing something. But if our motive is to prove to God that we are worthy of His love and forgiveness, then these righteous acts are no more than filthy rags before a holy God. In the case of the Galatians, their adherence to the Old Testament Mosaic Law was, in a sense, saying what Christ did by living a perfect life for them and then giving Himself as a sacrifice for them was not enough.

"Their adherence to the Mosaic Law was, in a sense, saying that what Christ did – living a perfect life for them and giving Himself as a sacrifice – was not enough."

Law's Limits

A lot of confusion surrounds the Christian's relationship to the Old Testament Law of God. Let me say again that the Law was and is good — David said as much in Psalm 119. The Law was not some man-made set of rules and regulations for ancient Israel. It is true that traditions and man-made additions were added to the Law of God, these things being very prevalent during Jesus' earthly ministry. However, the biblical Law of God was given by God for the good of His people. When Jesus came to earth and lived as a man, He perfectly kept all of God's righteous requirements. The Law was given to show sin. Every human being that was under the Law has demonstrated that it is not possible for sinful man to keep God's holy Law. That's where the sacrificial system came in. And Jesus, after fulfilling the Law, became the sacrificial Lamb for the sins of His people. This chapter makes a point that the promise to Abraham came hundreds of years prior to the Law being given through Moses. And the gospel that was preached to Abraham regarding faith proves without the shadow of a doubt that Abraham was counted righteous prior to any of God's written Law, as well as the Levitical priesthood — in other words, Abraham's descendants, including the Levites, were still in his loins at the time in which he was declared righteous, or, to use New Testament terms, saved.

Predated Promise

In recounting God's interaction with Abraham in Genesis 12, Paul reinforces the fact that the promise to Abraham and his descendants — the covenant that was made by God and ratified by God — predates the Law by 430 years. Furthermore, he points out the fact that the Law does not negate the prior promise. The Law was necessary as a tutor, or as an instructor, to guide Israel until the coming of Abraham's seed, which in this context is Jesus Christ Himself. When Jesus came and fulfilled the Law on behalf of God's people, and then was given as a sacrifice for the sins of God's people, He both removed our sins and gave us His righteousness. In light of this glorious truth, how could the Galatians or we attempt to reinstate a law that was never meant to save in the first place?

Summary

Salvation is all of grace. It is appropriated through faith, which has been given to God's elect people. Our faith is what is necessary for salvation, and any good works (not religious ritual which we will examine when we get to chapter 4) is only ever fruit that we bear because we have been grafted into Christ's vine, and functions as evidence of saving grace in our lives. Remember that Abraham simply believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. After believing God, he then acted consistently and in accordance with his belief. Let us do the same.

Overview

In this chapter, Paul continues to contrast the gospel with the Old Testament Law. He's going to use analogies such as child, heirs and their tutors who are temporarily in authority over them until they come of age. He also will liken heirs of the promise to Isaac while equating those under the Law as Ishmael.

Servants vs. Sons

When a child is being raised and taught and tutored by somebody that is not their parent, there is a sense in which they are under the temporary authority of that tutor. In the case of nobility, even though a son might be future heir to a throne, as a child they are under the authority of those placed over them for their learning, growth and development. This is an accurate picture of the Law's role in the life of believers down through the centuries. Just like there will come a day when a firstborn son will rise to the kingly throne, there would come a day when God's children were no longer in need of the Law as a tutor, because when Christ came — the promised Seed of Abraham — He would free them, having fulfilled the Law on their behalf. Once freed, and obtaining the righteousness of Christ, there is no longer a need for the Law as a taskmaster. It was a temporary placeholder between the covenant made to Abraham and the fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Paul was telling the Galatians that there was no need to go back to the Law and its service as a tutor because now they have Christ.

"Just as there would come a day when a firstborn son rises to the kingly throne, there would come a day when God's children were no longer in need of the Law as a tutor — because Christ came and freed them."

Flesh vs. Faith

Although Abraham is the father of faith, he is a role model — and he was by no means perfect. One example of his lack of faith is when, after receiving the promise that he would be the father of many nations through Sarah his wife, he took it upon himself not to wait for God's promise to be fulfilled and instead went into his wife's servant Hagar, by

whom he fathered a son named Ishmael. Even though he did have faith in God's promise, his faith did not perfectly translate into appropriate action. In this case, his faith wavered because he was very old and Sarah was very old, so he in a sense tried to help God fulfill His promise. This is a perfect example of living according to the flesh. Faith tells us to believe in God's promises and to wait upon Him to fulfill them.

Paul goes even further and likens Hagar to the Law of Sinai — the burden and reminder of the sins of the people, representing the earthly Jerusalem, which at the time was still under the Law. On the other hand, he pictures Sarah as the new Jerusalem, the heavenly Jerusalem — the new covenant in which the children of the promise are a part. These stark contrasts paint a clear picture of the superiority of the new covenant in Jesus' blood over the old covenant written on tablets of stone.

Summary

Brothers and sisters, just as the child of the slave woman was cast out, leaving only the child of the promise — the Old Covenant Law was fulfilled in Christ, meaning it is as obsolete now as it was at the time of the writing of the book of Galatians. As we follow Christ in faith, we cast off any attempt to revert to any Old Testament laws, rules, and regulations. What we do do is we strive to glorify God in our daily lives as we walk in thankfulness and gratitude for what He has already done for us in Christ. And anything that is praiseworthy coming from us is solely the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and serves as evidence of the truth of the gospel and of the validity of our faith in Jesus.

Overview

This chapter Paul is going to explain what freedom from the Law and sin looks like in the life of a believer. On the one hand, Paul argues that we are not only freed from keeping the Law, but if we attempt to keep any part of it, we are responsible for it all. He then goes on to attempt to convince his readers that just because they are not under the Law it does not mean that there are no rules or guidelines as to how they should live in light of the gospel.

All or Nothing

Apparently there were teachers either from within or coming from outside the Galatian churches that were trying to convince people that they needed to become circumcised in order to be saved. This one act — the defining sign of the Old Covenant — is symbolic and encompasses all of the rest of the Old Testament observances that were fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Paul is warning the people that if they take this sign and believe that it is required for all believers, they are taking upon themselves the yoke of slavery that Christ freed them from. Once you start down that path, there is no end to the things that you think you will need to fulfill in order to be acceptable to God. Paul uses such strong language that he says if you take upon that yoke again, you are severed from Christ. This does not teach that a person that has been truly redeemed can lose that redemption, but he is using such severe terminology to drive home how important a topic this is. And those who do take upon this extra burden, in the long run may not be saved to begin with, because this act shows a lack of faith in Christ's finished work on the cross on their behalf.

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Freedom

As previously mentioned, the freedom that comes from Jesus is freedom from the yoke of the Law, as well as the freedom to love one another with our lives. The freedom that we receive is not a freedom to do whatever we want and to sin in whatever way we please,

presuming on the graciousness of God. We keep coming back to the fact that if a professing believer does not have evidence of salvation by way of fruit and yet, at the same time, shows evidence of an unrepentant life without sorrow for sin, then there is no reason to believe that that person is in fact a child of God.

Don'ts

vs. 19–21

Contrary to popular belief, there are lists of things to avoid found in the New Testament. There are lists of sins and sinful behaviors and thoughts and motives that Christians are to guard against. These are referred to as deeds of the flesh here in Galatians 5:19–21:

"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."

Look at the above list again. It is not exhaustive by any means, but if any of these things characterize your life then now is the time to repent. Pray for forgiveness, go to any people that you may have wronged and ask for their forgiveness, ask the Lord for the gift of repentance, pray, and seek the Holy Spirit's leading to walk with Him. A quick caution before moving on: don't wait for an audible voice or sign from the Holy Spirit, but seek out His will from the Bible, as well as from more mature Christians who can come alongside and lead you in righteousness.

Do's

vs. 22–23

And here is a list of do's — more of evidences of a life in which daily we are surrendering to God's will and the leading of the Holy Spirit:

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."

Summary

Brother and sisters, if you are in Christ, you have been freed from the yoke of the Old Covenant Law as well as the yoke of personal sin. Seek Christ daily, read the word and be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. This will express itself not only in the absence of sinful desires and activities, but in a positive outpouring of care and love for others. Let us seek to be defined by this fruit of the Spirit.

Overview

In this final chapter, Paul admonishes the believers to be gentle when confronting brothers or sisters who may be in sin. He also warns all believers to walk circumspectly — that is, in self-monitoring to see if indeed we are bearing any fruit. He then goes on to make one final appeal to them to not give in to the temptation to be circumcised, once again taking upon themselves the yoke that Christ freed them from.

Spirit Sowing vs. Sinful Sowing

Every believer needs to have an accurate biblical view of one's self. Our problem is we usually think more highly of ourselves than we ought. So firstly, if someone is to be confronted about their sin, the ones doing the confronting need to first check themselves. They need to make sure that there are no logs in their own eyes, or that they think themselves incapable of committing the same sin or one far worse. This will guard against the sin of pride in our lives and will also ensure that the one needing the admonishment will receive it. But it is important that those of us going, go in love and gentleness, seeking the repentance and restoration of the individual and not their condemnation. After all, we all deserve God's wrath and His condemnation, and it is only through His unspeakable gracious gift that we have life and forgiveness. In addition to this, Paul uses agrarian terminology to give his readers a picture of the consequences of our actions. If we sow seeds for grapes, we will not harvest apples. In the same way, if we sow deeds of the flesh, we will reap death. There is no life found in sin. On the contrary, we need to sow seeds of the Spirit which, as listed in chapter 5, produce the fruit of the Spirit. This is the way that the church can care for one another as well as clearly share the gospel with the unbelieving world. We are to strive to put nothing in the way of the gospel presentation — living lives led by the Spirit will clear the path for our words as well as for our testimony. This is vitally important and if we understand this on a basic level, it will help guide our day-to-day decision-making.

"Living lives led by the Spirit will clear the path for our words as well as for our testimony."

Christ over Circumcision

At the close of his letter, Paul exposes the motives of those preaching circumcision to the Galatian churches. He is pointing out their hypocrisy in that these people do not even keep the whole Law themselves — they just want to make converts unto themselves. These false teachers want to be able to boast in the fact that they were able to convince the people to follow them and not follow him. Paul wisely differentiates himself from them in that he does not want anyone to boast in him — he does not even boast in himself, but he boasts in Christ. And boasting in Christ is not only allowable, it is commendable. All we have we have in Christ. We are to speak loudly and often of all He has done for us: His condescension, His taking on flesh, His living a perfect life, His giving a perfect life on the cross to pay for the sins of His people, His resurrection, His intercession for His people, and His imminent return to His people. He is the one who deserves the praise and adoration, and who is deserving of our boasting.

"All we have, we have in Christ. He is the one who deserves the praise and adoration, and who is worthy of our boasting."

Summary

Paul closes out his letter by warning his readers to be careful how they walk — to be humble and not prideful, to seek peace and not division, and to be aware that their decisions have consequences. Sowing in the Spirit will produce life; sowing in the flesh will only produce death. He makes one final appeal regarding circumcision and the fact that everything we have for salvation is found in Christ. Brother and sisters, we are to keep seeking Christ day in and day out. When we fall, we get back up again by His grace and with the help of our brothers and sisters in Christ. May all we do be done for His glory as well as the good of His local church — the people all around us.