

July 15, 2007

“Going Separate Ways” Galatians 4:21-31

FCF: Failure to distinguish between living by the law and the gospel

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Because living by law and living by gospel cannot coexist, (magnet) we must be clear of the differences and not confuse them.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

You can hear enlightening things in dark places. I was part of a tour inside Dunbar Cave recently and, as I was listening to the guide tell us about the salamanders, I heard him say that the pool of water before us – though crystal clear – was not drinkable. “*I know it looks fine. But hydrochloric acid would look the same. And if you drank that, it would burn your mouth pretty bad.*” You can hear enlightening things in dark places.

In this case, there is danger in not being able to tell the difference between two very different things. H₂O and HCl. One heals, the other harms. The same could be said of two ways of living and the danger of not being able to tell the difference between them – of living by the law, confident in self, and living by the gospel, confident in Christ.

SCRIPTURE READING: Galatians 4:21-31

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Some people are unable to coexist ([READ IllustrationViewer2](#)):

It all started in 1998 when Michael Zwick of Glenview, Illinois, complained about his neighbor's new fence. It left a dark area behind the garage where gang members might hang out, he felt. In response to his complaint, the neighbor, Jean Craft, told Zwick not to put his recycling bins on the public parkway in front of her house because they were killing the grass. In retaliation, Zwick blew leaves back onto her property, let his weeds grow 12 inches high, and aimed a fake security camera at her yard. Then she moved his recycling bins, complained to police about snow plowed onto her land and bought new shades and draperies to cover her windows. The village of Glenview finally wrote an ordinance that prohibited Zwick from putting his recycling bins close to his neighbor's house. Zwick defies the ordinance and has been given 10 citations and charged \$1,000 in fines. The case has now gone to Cook County court. Says Zwick, “We're digging in.”

The truth is that they aren't the only ones unable to coexist. The same could be said of living by the law and living by the gospel. Tapping into this slavery image that we see recurring through the letter, Paul asks his beloved gospel-forgetting and forsaking readers ([READ Galatians 4:21](#)). Playing on the word “law,” Paul is saying, “*You want to try to be justified, to be right with God, by your good works? Don't you remember what the Scriptures say so plainly about this?*” Which then takes him to this allegory.

Which is a problem if don't know your Old Testament history. So here's a crash course. Genesis tells us God had promised Abraham and Sarah a child. Time passed and late into their old age, it seemed none was coming. So Sarah gave Abraham her slave, Hagar. Hagar became pregnant and gave birth to a son, Ishmael. But then some years later, God came to Abraham again, rebuking him for his faithlessness and promising a son through Sarah. A year later, Isaac was born. Hagar and Ishmael's status was now in a precarious place, made all the worse when Sarah saw Ishmael scorning Isaac and demanded they be sent away – which Abraham, with God's assurance, reluctantly did.

That's Genesis. Here in Galatians, Paul uses these historical events to illustrate his point. That is, there are two ways set forth here – reliance upon the law and reliance upon the gospel – with a conflict between them, an utter contradiction such that they cannot coexist. So much so we must be clear of the differences and not confuse them.

I. LIVING BY THE LAW

The first of these ways that cannot coexist with the other is that of living by the law, a way Paul identifies with being enslaved. He speaks here of Hagar and Ishmael. He alludes to a twisted view of the covenant and a trusting in works. He attacks “the present Jerusalem” – Judaism and the folly of legalism, adding to the gospel of grace. He pleads with his readers to turn back from this path that will surely and only enslave them.

A) Our Standing before God

Enslaving them in terms of their standing with God, leaving them no sense of certainty. Think here. Hagar and Ishmael – what legal standing did these slaves have?

1. Uncertainty as to where they stood

None. No certainty as to where they stood. No assurance that they’d measured up.

2. Uncertainty as to what would be

No certainty as to where they stood or what the future might hold. They lived with the continual threat of being sent away. Their status in Abraham’s tent was insecure, never firm. One blunder could, and ultimately did, cost them their place in the household.

So it is with all who rely on their good works. They can never have assurance of their salvation because they can never be sure that they have done enough to please God.

Illustration:

There was a woman who wanted to join the church. I began asking her questions. “If you were to die today, do you believe you’d be going to heaven?” I asked. She began to cry. And I thought what was coming was a profession of her love for Jesus and a deep appreciation for His mercy. But that wasn’t it at all. Through her tears, she said, “I read my Bible and I pray for those in need. I go to church when I can and take care of my elderly neighbor.” Then she looked at me with the saddest expression and said, “And I hope that’s enough.” Hers were tears of bondage, not joy. Of fear, not freedom.

Which is where living by the law ultimately will leave you – with no certainty.

B) Our Attitude towards Ourselves

But this enslavement comes in other ways – in our attitudes towards ourselves as well (**READ Galatians 4:23a**). At one level, Paul is simply saying of Ishmael’s birth there was nothing spectacular or extraordinary. Hagar brought him forth. That said, when Paul speaks of something being of “the flesh,” he’s referring to a self-dependence and self-reliance that refuses to make room for God. And surely both are in mind here.

1. Despair

Now the enslavement of going by “the flesh” comes in one of two ways. Either despair (if living up to standards are all you have and you know you can’t live up to them)...

2. Pride

...or pride (if you’ve deluded yourself into believing you have lived up to the standards).

Either way, you’re locked into a vicious cycle of enslavement.

C) Our Relationships with Others

Which then has devastating effects on our relationships with others. Listen to this description of the bitter fruit of living according to the law (**READ Galatians 4:28-29**).

1. Withdrawal

This new teaching, this perversion of the gospel Paul’s readers had given in to, had lead to a compromised relationship with him – to a withdrawal, to a wall between them.

2. Attack

His readers withdrawing. And his opponents attacking. And you see that in Paul’s words here – their determination to do whatever it takes to be “right.”

Little wonder then Paul speaks to a need to clean house (**READ Galatians 4:30**).

Illustration:

In thinking of how our damaged view of ourselves before God then leads to this damage around us, I'm reminded of an image C. S. Lewis spoke of involving a fleet of ships sailing across the ocean on a foggy night. They can't see, the steering mechanisms are fouled, and they then begin to collide into one another causing breaches in the hulls.

Damaged people damaging one another because of a damaged view of God and then themselves. It's quite an image and one that fits well into what we see here.

Application:

So, here's the question: Does this sound like you? There's really something for all of us here. If you are living by the law, convinced your sin, if anything, is just a little bitty problem and so you just need a little bitty help – this is where you are. This is where you are. And this is where you are heading. This perspective is why the lives of the people around you are in such a mess. And yours too. And mine at times as well.

I want you to know I have a Judaizer/legalism/self-righteousness detector. It goes off as soon as it picks up on someone having bought into the lie and is living the life of a slave. I've alluded to it already. "Do you think God accepts you? Do you believe He loves you? Why?" If your answer is "God loves me, accepts me, because..." you are a child of the slave. If you tag any reason to that outside of His mercy, you are in bondage.

II. LIVING BY THE GOSPEL

Which takes us to this other way – the freedom of the gospel. But the difference is such it cannot coexist with the way of the law. Here Paul speaks of Sarah and Isaac, of the covenant rightly understood, of the Jerusalem above, the antithesis to "the system," rooted in being right with God by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

A) Our Standing before God

Set free in our standing before God, now given the greatest certainty.

1. Surety as to where they stood

Think with me now of Sarah and Isaac. Their place in Abraham's tent was secure. They belonged. They were the objects of promise and would never be cast away.

2. Surety as to what would be

Secure as to where they stood and secure as to what would be.

Just as any who rely on Jesus will never be cast away by God, for they are His adopted children, to whom the inheritance now belongs by right (**READ John 1:12-13**).

Illustration:

Some of you have heard this – the study of the children on the playground. With no fence around the perimeter of the playground, the children were tentative and huddled closer to the center. But when the fence was put up, then they felt free to roam everywhere. Someone had staked out where they were and where they were to be. Well, moving from the study to just experience, you've felt this or at least seen it. Children just tend to be more confident, more daring, more assured, when their parents are around.

Well, here's the thing. Our Father is "around." And we can rest in His love.

B) Our Attitude towards Ourselves

Which then takes us to the freedom that comes by the gospel in our attitude not just towards God but towards ourselves (**READ Galatians 4:23**). A clear contrast here – "born according to the flesh" and "born through promise." Just the opposite of what we said before – a life of Christ dependence, Christ reliance, and Christ's righteousness.

1. Lifted out of despair

Which then lifts us out of despair. We're freed from never being able to measure up.

2. Pride cast out

And any temptation to pride is cast out. For our hope is set fully in what Christ has done.

What Paul is saying to his readers is that "who they were" had been redefined. With the coming of the gospel of grace, there was now no room for despair or pride.

C) Our Relationships with Others

Which flows over to relationships with others. How? Well, how is Paul relating to his audience? We know how they responded to him but how did he respond to them?

1. Initiate

Well, we're reading his letter, aren't we? The gospel freed Paul to initiate in this conflict.

2. Bear long and well

To initiate with them and then bear long with them as well.

Why? How? Because humble people tend to get along. Instead of being fixated on doing whatever it takes to be right, they become committed to doing whatever it takes to make things right. Even when that's hard and messy (**READ Galatians 4:30-31**).

Application:

So I've got this detector. It shows when someone knows the truth and is living free. "Do you think God accepts you? Do you believe He loves you? Why?" "**Jesus Loves Me, This I Know...**" Does this not pull on you? Put your faith in Christ. Hear what Paul is saying and wrestle it through. Believe, accept what he is saying as true. And then trust it. Lean into it. Rely upon it just as you are relying on the chair beneath you to support you. And then preach this gospel to yourself everyday throughout the day.

Listen, this is a call for rejoicing. Paul is singing here!

CONCLUSION:

But in the rejoicing, we must be clear. There is a conflict. In fact, we have all the more reason to rejoice in that God has made the conflict so clear. The similarities between these two boys is but superficial. Yes, they had the same father. Yes, they were both circumcised. But the circumstances of their births and their legal standings were completely different. For they each had different mothers. Who's your mother?

I was reminded this week of the feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys. Perhaps it was just having come back from a family reunion. The feud was the stuff of legend – each clan living on opposite sides of a river, selling moonshine, involved in guerilla activity during the Civil War. But for nearly twenty years, that part of West Virginia and Kentucky witnessed a relentless series of kidnappings, betrayals, arson, and murder. Until the authorities intervened and a truce was called, it seemed the two sides simply could not coexist. The only hope being that they would go their separate ways.

The differences there and here are that stark. All of which brings me to a question. I know it's usually phrased, "Who's your daddy?" But here we have to ask, "Who's your mother?" Are you a child of the slave woman or the free? Do you know merely the birth "according to the flesh" – relying and depending on yourself – or have you become a child "born through promise" – relying and rejoicing in the freedom of the gospel? Which group are you in? Who's your mother? (**READ Galatians 4:31**) My prayer for us all is that we would grow in our appreciation for what this means and that it would take deep root and bear great fruit in our lives. May it be. May it be.

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