

Galatians Study, Introduction
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Pastor Daniel Severson

On both his first and second missionary journeys, Paul traveled through southern Galatia in what is now southeastern Turkey. During these journeys, he established what were probably several Christian communities in this area. The Galatians were gentiles, and because Paul did not believe gentiles were obligated to conform their lives to Mosaic laws as the Jews did, he did not require them to be circumcised or to observe dietary laws. For Paul, the good news of Jesus Christ was the announcement that in Christ, God had accomplished our salvation in his death and resurrection. This was and is purely a gift of God and therefore received by faith.

Around 50-55 AD, this is what Paul taught and preached about to the Galatians, and he successfully established a Galatian Christian community on this basis. However, after Paul left, several Jewish Christians, perhaps at the behest of James, the Lord's brother and head of the Jerusalem mother church, travelled to Galatia and squarely contradicted Paul's version of the gospel. These Jewish Christians, perhaps from among the Ebionites, believed that gentile converts to Christ also were obligated to obey Jewish law. In addition, this group seemed to question Paul's apostolic credentials since he was not one of the first twelve chosen by Jesus himself, and that therefore he had not heard directly from the Messiah.

Word of this got back to Paul, who was apparently told that the Galatian Christians were now actively engaged with Jewish law. As a result, Paul wrote this letter, a letter wherein he defends his apostolic credentials and, more than anything else, focuses on the message that salvation is in the gift of Christ, apart from any law, and that all that is needed is faith in this gift.

In order to bring home his point, Paul describes several experiences he had with Peter and some of the other original disciples. Since the issue of whether or not gentile converts were obligated to obey Jewish law was the first great controversy in the Christian church, Paul describes a meeting he had with the "pillars" of the Jerusalem Church: Peter, James, and John. At that meeting an agreement was reached whereby Paul would become the apostle to the gentiles and Peter to the Jews. However, their message would be the same. We are made righteous (justified) by grace through faith. In other words, faith in Jesus Christ is what saves us from the power of sin and death. While the law is fine and good, it does not have the power to save. Only Jesus Christ can do that.

In addition to this, in order to establish himself as an apostle with the same authority as that of the others, he tells his story of conversion and his call to become an apostle directly from Christ.

Paul's letter to the Galatians has been called "the Magna Carta of Christian Freedom." We are freed from the obligations of the law because of the grace of Christ. Because this

is basically the theme of the letter, it was a favorite of Martin Luther whose theology centered on this very same theme. In fact, one of Luther's most influential books, if not the most influential, was his 1535 commentary on Galatians. This book provides his most comprehensive treatment of his theological perspective. So beloved was this book to Luther that he called it his little "Katie" after the woman he married.

Therefore, to begin with, I'm going to set out what Luther believes is the main argument in this book. When it comes to a description of faith and grace, there is no more articulate spokesperson than Luther. The opening chapter of Luther's commentary is entitled "The Argument of St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians."

Luther first points out that Paul wants to establish "the doctrine of faith, grace, the forgiveness of sins or Christian righteousness" so that we know the difference between this and other forms of righteousness. These others include what he calls:

- 1) Political righteousness, which is the concern of the state and argued over by lawyers.
- 2) Ceremonial righteousness which has to do with cultural traditions observed differently in different cultures, such as the proper behavior expected by people in the workplace and in social situations. Parents and teachers teach this righteousness.
- 3) The righteousness of the 10 commandments. Christians also teach this righteousness but only after the doctrine of faith in God's grace, for it is God's grace that gives us the ability to observe this righteousness.

These three forms of righteousness all differ from Christian righteousness because they can be attained by our purely natural endowments. These are the righteousness attained by works on our part, and they are therefore active forms of righteousness.

With respect to Christian righteousness on the other hand, we are purely passive receivers. We neither work nor earn this form of righteousness but rather permit someone else to work in us. It's not that a change in us does not take place in Christian righteousness. Rather, it's a matter of who makes the change and what kind of change it is. It is worked inside of us, not forced on us from the outside.

Also this righteousness is worked in us in afflictions and a fearful conscience. The law (and this is referred to as the second use of the law) attacks our conscience because over and against its standards, we can see how sinful we have been. At such times, our conscience may tell us that we must speedily get to work improving our lives by all manner of good works. This is how a guilty conscience works. It tries to engage in acts of atonement for what we have done, or it tries to undo it. But this can never bring peace to a terrified conscience before God and can only lead to despair.

At this point, the troubled conscience has no remedy except to take hold of the promise of grace offered in Christ—this passive righteousness which is given to us as a gift. This is the righteousness of mercy and the forgiveness of sin. This comes to us through Christ and the Holy Spirit in us, for Christ through the Spirit removes our sins from our conscience, freeing us from culpability and giving us peace.

Luther uses the metaphor of rain watering the earth. Without the rain, the earth dries up and there is no life in it. With the rain, the earth comes to life. But the earth doesn't do anything to make this rain come. It is purely passive in this regard. It comes of its own accord.

So, we do not preach that there is only grace and no law, for it is through the law that the knowledge of sin comes. The law was given to kill the old Adam so that, through the power of God's love in the Holy Spirit, a new self can be born capable of what Paul calls "the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." These virtues are created in us through the passive righteousness that comes from faith in Jesus Christ.

This is not something that happens in one born-again experience. It grows in us over time as we turn to the mercy of God again and again in worship and prayer. We will never experience the elimination of all sin within us—in our hearts, for sin is not just behavior but the things that are in our hearts motivating that behavior. It is the sin that is in us that the law attacks. And so we must always be able to distinguish between the roles of the law and of grace. The law accuses, afflicts, causes fear, and in the absence of hope-- even despair. It removes our false pride and exposes the sin that is in us.

The gospel, on the other hand, provides forgiveness, healing of the conscience, comfort, acceptance, love, and life. Instead of bringing law, the gospel raises up. It gives us new life by the power of the Holy Spirit as we come to faith in Christ. This passive righteousness becomes a more powerful source for good as we grow in faith over time and engage in regular and persistent spiritual disciplines such as worship, prayer, scripture reading, and meditation.

Thus, for Paul and for Luther, there must be a clear distinction made between law and gospel. The two must not be confused for if law ever enters into what is necessary for salvation, we would lose Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the redemption they bring us. The Spirit works in our hearts through the proclamation of Jesus Christ. We receive this passively (*i.e.*, we hear it) and faith is thereby created in us. However while we are passive in terms of receiving faith, faith itself is not passive. Rather, faith is active, serving the neighbor in need. Another way of saying this is that faith is active in love. The Christian life of service is not motivated by law. This would be works righteousness. It is motivated by faith which receives the love of God, making us capable of loving, in return, both God and neighbor.

Thus, in this epistle, Paul is concerned to instruct us in this perfect righteousness—the righteousness of Christ. Being sinners, the law cannot make us righteous. It can only make us worse sinners. For in trying to make ourselves righteous through the law, we become even more self-centered than we were before. We do good deeds, not for the sake of the neighbor, but for our own sake—to earn a reward from God, to placate guilt, or to make ourselves feel better. Such works are not done out of empathy for our neighbor, but out of the desire to help ourselves in some way. This is not love. This is

being curved in on ourselves. Love seeks the good of the neighbor, not the good of the self.

Therefore, the only way to be freed from this self-absorption is to die to the old self and be raised up as a new self. It's the passive righteousness of faith that has the power to do this because the Holy Spirit, who transforms and makes us new, works in our hearts through faith in Christ. Christ is God's gift of righteousness to us and only he has the power to free us from the law, sin, and death, and free us for love of God and neighbor.