

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Galatians		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	24		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Galatians 4:21:31		
Date:	August 23, 2026 (a.m.)		

LEGALISM AND THE GOSPEL

“Legalism,” writes Warren Wiersbe, “is one of the major problems among Christians today.”¹ What is legalism? Many Christians are inclined to believe that stressing the need for obedience in the Christian life is tantamount to legalism. This common but completely erroneous view is refuted over and over again in the New Testament (cf. Romans 6:17; 1 Corinthians 10:6-10; Galatians 5:13, 14; 2 Thessalonians 3:14; 1 Timothy 6:14; James 2:8-13; 1 John 3:21-24). Legalism has very distinct features. William Bates, the old English Puritan (Puritans are often called Legalists simply because they were rightly concerned with holy living), *correctly* noted the natural inclination of the human heart is prone to seek acceptance with God by merit. “As pride at first aspired to make man as God, so it tempts him to usurp the honour of Christ, to be his own Saviour. He is unwilling to stoop, that he may drink of the waters of life. Till the heart by the weight of its guilt is broken in pieces, and loses its former fashion and figure, it will not humble comply with the offer of salvation for the merits of another.”² James S. Stewart has identified the three main marks of legalism: (1) *Redemption by human effort*. We earn God’s favor by works, a direct contradiction to Ephesians 2:8-10; (2) *It obligates God*. A person points to their works and demands that God reward them, a direct contradiction of 1 Corinthians 4:7; (3) *Fondness for negatives*. This mindset simply thinks that religion consists of rules that in reality produce pride and false humility, a direct contradiction to Colossians 2:18-23.³ Michael Horton has an extended discussion on the subject of legalism, which helpfully lays out the matter. “Legalism (or Neonomianism) errs by either (1) requiring complex and perfect obedience to the commands of Scripture or (2) lowering the demands by substituting either imperfect obedience or more accessible rules for Christian behavior. Affirming the first, Pelagianism introduced the principle that became a hallmark especially of Kant’s ethics, known popularly as *ought implies can*. This principle was also invoked by the nineteenth-century revivalist Charle G. Finney, who insisted that because God cannot command something that we cannot fulfill, *As has already been said, there can be no justification in a legal or forensic sense, but upon the ground of universal, perfect, and uninterrupted obedience to law*. As we have already seen, this principle confuses *natural* and *moral* ability (see ch. 13, *Natural and Moral Ability*, pp. 431-34). Created in God’s image, humanity is naturally capable of fulfilling God’s law perfectly, but its whole nature is morally bound by sin. With Paul, we must reject the Pelagian heresy: *I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose* (Gal. 2:21). *For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin* (Ro. 3:20). A more common error (associated with Semi-Pelagianism) relaxes the law’s demands and, consequently, lowers also its conception of grace. According to the late medieval nominalists, *God will not deny his grace to those who do what lies within them (facientibus quod in se est deus non denegat gratiam)*. No one will be saved by strict justice (*condign* merit), but one can be saved by God’s decision to accept our good effort as adequate (*congruent* merit). This view lowers the demands of God’s righteousness expressed in his law while falsely assuming that doing *what lies within* us can merit salvation even congruently. It was this error that the Apology of the *Augsburg Confession* targets: *But when a conscience is properly aware of its sin and misery, all joking, all playful thoughts vanish and the situation becomes one of utmost gravity. . . . But such terrified consciences surely feel that nothing can be merited either by condignity or of congruity, and so they quickly sink into fear and despair.*⁴

In essence, legalism is defined as the doctrine that one may by one's own unaided effort gain favor before God. In Galatians 4:21-31, Paul concludes his appeal and argument by directing the Galatians back to the story of Abraham's two sons and the conflict between Sarah and Hagar.

- I. **THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.** Paul begins this section with an interrogation. He is aware that his letter will be read aloud to the congregations and that the Judaizers will be present. "So you want to be under the law, do you? Well, listen to the law! It will be your judge and will condemn you!"
 - A. **The Illustration.** The account of Abraham and his seed becomes the focal point in Paul's argument. Abraham had two sons by two different women. The birth of the first son Ishmael was by Hagar, the bondservant of Sarah. This took place when Abraham was 86 years old (Genesis 16:4-16). The second son Isaac, the son of promise, was born to Sarah when Abraham was 100 years old.
- II. **PAUL'S APEAL TO ALLEGORY.** Allegorizing Scripture is risky business. First off, we need to recognize that the Apostle is not denying the historicity of the Old Testament narrative. The word translated "allegory" is, in fact, the word from which we get allegory, *allēgoreō*. It comes from *allo agoreuō* which means "say something else." Even though our English word comes from this Greek word, Paul is not using the word in the same sense. We think of an allegory and Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress* or Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* comes to mind. That is *not* what Paul has in mind. In the opinion of J. B. Lightfoot, Paul's use of the word is quite close to his use of the word "type," as in 1 Corinthians 10:11.⁵ What is a type. A type is an event or a person or even an institution in the Old Testament that foreshadows or corresponds with a New Testament person, event or institution.
 - A. **Paul's Exposition.** The two women, Sarah and Hagar, represent two covenants (the Abrahamic and the Mosaic). Hagar, the bondwoman, stands for the Mosaic, and her children are in bondage. Further, the apostle goes on to identify Hagar with Mt. Sinai in Arabia, far removed from the promised land. The very place where the Law was given is connected with the slave woman, Hagar, for she went south to Beersheba, and Ishmael dwelt near Sinai. Thus, Arabia becomes the land of bondsman. As S. Lewis Johnson has written, "Hagar and Ishmael left the land of blessing for a desert. Thus do all who abandon grace!"⁶
 - B. **Paul's Scriptural Support.** The apostle illustrates his allegory by appealing to Isaiah 54:1. The prophet in 51:2 had pointed to God's covenantal dealing with Abraham and Sarah as a *type*, and in 54:1, after he had unfolded the mystery of the Suffering Servant of the LORD (Isaiah 52:13-53:12), he calls upon Israel to sing with joy over God's gracious salvation (Romans 11:11-24). Paul sees the prophecy of Isaiah as having its fulfillment in the salvation of Gentiles.
- III. **THE PERSONAL APPLICATION.** Note how Paul presses home his point. The gospel that he preached to them, the one that they received solely by faith, made them *children of promise*.
 - A. **The Correspondence.** Believers, like Isaac, are born again by divine interposition (John 3:3, 7). The flesh persecutes the spirit. There will always be the hostility between the two. Therefore, the apostolic admonition, "Cast out the bondwoman," is God's judgment on the legalist – so Paul is telling the Galatians, "Get rid of those legalists!"

CONCLUSION: Mark Devers asks, "Do you see then why legalism is so dangerous? Ultimately, legalism is simply one form of walking according to the sinful nature and not the Spirit: *For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature They are in conflict with each other* (5:17). On the one hand, legalism leads to terrible self-deception. It causes us to think we are *pretty good* or *good enough*, when really, our least sins condemn us before a perfectly holy God. Borrowing from

Deuteronomy, Paul says, *Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do **everything** written in the Book of the Law* (3:10; cf. Dt. 27:26; emphasis added). On the other hand, legalism – and the sinful nature behind it – enables us to pursue all sorts of sin while maintaining this sense of being *good enough*”: *The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like* (5:19-21a). And the end of such actions is dire: *I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God* (5:21b). Therefore, any false teaching that offers something other than the true remedy – the forgiveness and new life we have in Christ by faith – must be avoided with all our might. *Get rid* of those who wish to reintroduce the law, Paul says (4:30). After all, *A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough* (5:9), and the church, as the holy, unleavened loaf, must get rid of the leaven that quickly spreads and spoils.”⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Free: An Expository Study of Galatians* (Victor Books, 1975), p. 108.

² *The Complete Works of William Bates I* (rpt. Sprinkle Publications, 1990), p. 399.

³ James S. Steward, *A Man in Christ: The Vital Elements of St. Paul's Religion* (MacMillan, 1935), pp. 84-88.

⁴ M. S. Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims On The Way* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 664.

⁵ J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (MacMillan, 1869), p. 180.

⁶ S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., *Believer's Bible Bulletin: Galatians* (Believer's Chapel, 1978), No. 12, p. 4.

⁷ M. Devers, *The Message of The New Testament* (Crossway, 2005), p. 226.