

The Flesh Against the Spirit
Galatians 5:17-23
September 30, 2012

We recently finished the book of Hebrews and now we are nearing the end of our study of Galatians. And in those two books the message is much the same – don't go back to that old Jewish religion of Judaism. I am confident that none of us will ever be so inclined after hearing this message for nearly a year now.

It was certainly an important message in the early church. After all, the Jewish religion was the authorized pre-Christ religion. It was authorized by God himself when he gave the Law to Moses and established the rules and regulations of their religion. And the Jews practiced this religion for 1500 years. And they were not prone to give it up when Christ came.

Here is the great mistake of the Jews. Their unbelief and their blindness caused them to reject the very Christ that Judaism prefigured. You see, Judaism was first and foremost a picture of Jesus Christ. All of the rituals and ceremonies were pictures of Him. And this old Jewish administration of things had its relevancy and its meaning only in the coming Christ.

But the trouble is that man in general, and the Jews in particular, loved religion rather than Christ. The Jews loved all the rituals and ceremonies. They loved their priests. They loved the beautiful garments. They loved all the activity. But they never loved the Christ who was to come.

The Jews, like all fallen men, were obstinate and hard-hearted people from the beginning. They murmured and grumbled against God in Egypt, in the wilderness and in the land of Canaan. And they fell in love with an outward religion and never looked for the Christ which that religion typified.

When Christ finally did appear on the earth, the majority of the Jews were already so in love with their religion that they had no use for Christ. They had no understanding at all that Christ was the sum and substance of their religion. And they rejected Christ. You know the verse well,

He came unto his own, and his own received him not.

John 1:11

True religion is not found in rituals and ceremonies. It is not found in man's religious works at all. It is not found in a set of rules and regulations. But true religion is found in the gracious and merciful person of Christ. Salvation was never found in the Mosaic Law.

But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident.

Galatians 3:11

Salvation is found in the beautiful person of Jesus Christ. It always was in Him. Salvation was in Jesus Christ in the Old Testament and salvation is in Jesus Christ in the New Testament. No man has ever gone to heaven on his own merit. But if a man is in heaven it is by the merit of Jesus Christ only.

Salvation is by one way only. It is by being connected to Jesus Christ. Salvation is when you are in Him. Salvation is when His perfect life counts for you. Salvation is when his death satisfies the penalty of the law for you. Salvation is when Jesus Christ ascends to heaven and sits down at the right hand of God the Father and offers his sacrifice on your behalf.

Salvation has nothing to do with anything you do. Salvation is not earned in any way. It is not a matter of religion. It is not a matter of being a good person. It is not a matter of being better than your neighbor. Salvation hinges solely on whether you are connected to Christ.

The book of Galatians is encouraging Paul's new Gentile converts to stay with Christ and not to leave Him for the works of the Law. And in this book Paul engages in an effort to convince them that Christianity is better than Judaism.

In order to convince them, Paul has contrasted that old way with the new way in Christ. And there are several points of contrast. And I thought we would make an effort this morning to review those contrasts so that we will be convinced along with the Galatians that Christ is the best way.

The Contrast Between the The Mosaic Covenant and the Abrahamic Covenant

In chapter three, Paul put up a strong argument that the Abrahamic Covenant is better than the Mosaic Covenant. You may remember that the Abrahamic Covenant preceded the Mosaic Covenant by 430 years.

The Abrahamic Covenant was the gospel covenant.

And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham.

Galatians 3:8

The Abrahamic Covenant was the gospel because it promised salvation in Christ. There was mercy and grace under this covenant. And God promised to bless all nations.

The Mosaic Covenant, on the other hand, came 430 years later when Moses marched down from Mt. Sinai and gave the Law to Israel. Now this Mosaic Covenant is the covenant that Israel fell in love with. And they worshipped this covenant. And they forgot all about the gospel that was preached to Abraham. And they fell in love with the rituals of the Mosaic Covenant.

Now the Mosaic Covenant was only given as a temporary covenant. It was added until the seed should come. (Galatians 3:19) And then, as Paul says, that Old Covenant was done away.

The Abrahamic Covenant was not done away. It goes right on because it was the gospel covenant. It was the better covenant by far, because salvation was found in the Abrahamic Covenant.

The Contrast Between Law and Promise

The chief characteristic of the Mosaic Covenant was that it was a law system of religion. It is called the Mosaic Law. And under this system, righteous men were proven righteous and sinful men were proven sinners.

You might remember that we compared the Law to an MRI machine. When men were placed under the Law, it either showed that he was a sinner or he was not. The Law had no power to cure the disease, but it could tell you whether or not you had the disease. And of all the men that were placed in this Law machine, one man only was diagnosed as righteous and all other men were diagnosed as sinners. The Law said, "I find no fault in this man Jesus, but I find fault in all others." So the Law served a dual purpose. It served to show the perfection of Jesus and the imperfection of all other men.

This is why it was so foolish for the Galatians to want to go back under the Law. The Law is a curse upon sinners.

For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse.

Galatians 3:10

But look at the promise to Abraham. God simply came to Abraham and told him He was going to bless Him. God said, "I will do this and I will do that. I will give you a seed. In thee shall all nations be blessed." And Abraham believed God and salvation was handed to Abraham freely.

You see, the Law says, "You are a sinner and therefore you are cursed." The Promise says, "I will save you from your sins."

And Paul asks, "Why do you want to go back under the Law?"

The Contrast Between Works and Faith

Under the Law, works was the operative principle. The Law was a system of merit. It is called the "works of the law."

For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse.

Galatians 3:10

Under the Law you were required to do the Law. You were required to do all the Law. And you were required to continually do all the Law.

Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.

Galatians 4:10

And this was the chief operating principle of Judaism. Work, work and more work. And after you worked, your works were judged. And if they were perfect then you were accepted. But if you failed in one point, you were guilty of all.

Paul says, "Do you really want to go back to that."

Salvation in Christ operates on a completely different principle. It is not works at all. It is not doing at all. Christ says, "I have done the work for you. I have fulfilled the Law. I have completely satisfied the demands of the Law. I obeyed it in every respect. I never once failed under the Law. The Law found no fault in me. And then Christ says, "Here, let my righteousness be imputed to your account. Let my perfect obedience count on your behalf. Let my works count for you."

Do you see how offensive it is when sinners say, "No thanks. I think I will try to make it on my own. I think I can work my way to heaven. I think I can do it. I think God will accept me and my works."

And Paul says, "Oh foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you."

Salvation in Christ operates not on the principle of works, but on the principle of faith. Judaism operated by works. Christianity operates by faith.

The Contrast Between Bondage and Liberty

If a person is clinging to Judaism or any other religion that advocates works rather than pure grace, then the result is bondage. Can you imagine living every day of your life working that you can achieve heaven and avoid hell? Every moment of every day of your life you must match the righteousness of Jesus

himself. You must obey all the rituals. You must adhere to every ceremony. You must attend every required function. And when you have done every outward act, then you must evaluate every thought and intent of your heart. And there can be no evil intent whatsoever. Every motive must be righteous. You must love God with a pure heart and love your neighbor as yourself. And not a one of us can stand under such a standard.

And if we yet seek to be under the Law, then we are in prison. We are convicted felons under the Law of God. And we are awaiting execution. And the day of your execution is drawing near.

But wait. In Christ there is liberty.

Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free.

Galatians 5:1

You were in prison under the Law and the day of your execution was at hand. And the prison guard came to your cell to get you and you were terrified. But to your amazement, the guard threw open the cell door and he said, 'You have been set free.'

And you say, "How have I been set free? I have violated the Law and I am condemned."

And the guard says, "Yes. But the penalty of the Law has been paid in full and now you are set free."

"But who has paid the penalty? The Judge has already sentenced me to death."

And the guard says, "Why the Judge himself took your place in the room of execution this morning. And now you are free to go.

And this little metaphor only tells part of the story of our liberty. Yes, we are free from the guilt of our sins. Our sins are cast away. Our guilt is washed away in the blood of Christ. Our necks have been taken out from under the blade of the guillotine and we have been turned loose.

No. It is even more than that. We were standing on the precipice of hell itself. And the flames of eternal torment were lapping at our feet and we were about to be cast into that eternal torment called hell. And then, Jesus set us free. We have been set free – not from the guillotine or the electric chair. Those are only temporary torments. But we have been set free from billions and billions of years of torment. We have been freed from an eternity of gnashing of teeth.

Yes, under the Law there was bondage. But in Christ there is liberty.

Now let me expand on what liberty we have in Christ. Yes, we have been set free from the guilt of sin. The guard has opened the prison doors and set us free. We are no longer destined for the electric chair.

But what happens if we violate the Law again? What if I march out of that prison cell and commit another crime? Will I be arrested again? Will I be placed in prison again? Will I be executed after all?

And the answer is that Christ has done more than simply remove you from the prison cell. He has removed you out from under the Law. The Law will never have any authority over you again. The Law has been successfully fulfilled. The penalty has been thoroughly paid. The Law can never touch you again. That's why Paul says,

Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free.

Christ has not only set us free from past sins, but he has set us free from future sins.

Saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.

Romans 3:7, 8

So, how vast is our liberty in Christ? Our guilt is forever removed. And, the very thing that condemned us is removed. We are taken out from under the Law. The Law has dominion only

over those who are under it. But Christ has taken us out from under the Law. And now we are free indeed.

So, I hope you see the great contrast between bondage and liberty. Those who want to be under the Law are under bondage. But those in Christ are set free.

But you say, "What if I sin" And I say, "If you sin, there is no law to condemn you. If you are in Christ, you are set free from the Law. This is the message of Galatians chapter five. There is liberty in Christ. Liberty from what? Liberty from the Law.

If you are in Christ, here is what happens when you sin.

My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

I John 2:1

What we have learned in the book of Hebrews is that Jesus Christ rose from the dead and he ascended into the real Holy of Holies in heaven. And he doesn't meet with God once a year like the Levitical High Priest, but Jesus sat down at the right hand of God. And Jesus is the perpetual advocate for his people.

And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

I tell you, if you can't find any other reason to thank God, thank Him that he has taken you out from under the law and when you sin, and you surely will, Jesus advocates for you at the right hand of God in heaven.

So, you see the contrast between bondage and liberty in Galatians 5:1.

Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

Galatians 5:1

Now, when the unregenerate or the legalists hear us talk of such liberty, they will say, "Well then, if the law no longer accuses you, if God has forgiven all your sins forever, then why

don't you just go ahead and sin it up." This objection Paul anticipates.

For brethren, ye have been called unto liberty, only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh.

Galatians 5:13

For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.

Galatians 5:17

Now we have been contrasting Judaism and Christianity. We have contrasting the Law of Moses against the Promise to Abraham. We have contrasted the bondage under the Law to the liberty that we have in Christ.

And now, there is another contrast between the two systems.

Contrast of the Flesh and the Spirit

There is a certain source that fuels activity under each administration. When God gave the Law to Israel, he gave them no special ability to perform it. He simply said, "Here is my Law. Do it." And the fuel that drove them under the Law was the fuel of their own flesh. They were left to their own sinful nature.

Now the flesh is not our skin and bones. Here in our text, the flesh is that driving force within us that causes us to act selfishly and carnally and rebelliously against God. It is that sinful principle within that we inherited from Adam. And under the law, the flesh is the fuel that keeps us going. We are required to act righteously according to the dictates of the law, when the very thing that propels us is unrighteous. Now notice the works of the flesh.

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envying, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like.

Galatians 5:19-21

These are some of the things that flow naturally from the flesh. And you can easily see that the works of the flesh are inconsistent with the demands of the Law. The Law says, "Be perfect." The flesh says, "I can't do it." But those under the Law have no other principle within them except the flesh.

But look what a marvelous gift is given to those of us in Christ. God takes us out from under the Law and then gives us the Holy Spirit of God to fuel our walk with God. We are not left to the irresistible force of our fleshly nature. But we are given a new nature empowered by the Spirit of God.

In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise.

Ephesians 1:13

Who hath sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts.

II Corinthians 1:22

That good thing which was committed unto thee keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us.

II Timothy 1:14

Here is the interesting thing about those of us that are in Christ. There is a war going on inside of us.

For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.

Galatians 5:17

I think all Christians can relate to this war inside. There is a desire to serve God and to do right. And this desire comes from the Spirit of God. And then there is that other force within that wars against the Spirit. And that force is the flesh. Now perhaps we can learn a couple of things from this verse.

1. God does not immediately remove the fleshly nature when he saves us. This is obvious from our text. The flesh remains and it wars against the Spirit. So don't expect that you will not be bothered by that old nature.

2. It seems that the flesh will frustrate us such that we cannot do that which we want to do and we do that which we do not want to do. This seemed to be the case in Paul's life. (See Romans 7:14-23)

So, we have seen the contrast between the flesh and the Spirit.

Contrast what the Flesh Produces with what the Spirit Produces

You will notice that the flesh will always produce evil deeds. And if you are trying to get to heaven by obedience to the law, then you are led by the flesh. You see, the flesh is the operative principle for law keepers. It is the fuel under the law. And the flesh will cause every man to break the law.

But when God gives us His Spirit, the Spirit produces something in us. But notice that it is quite different than what the flesh produces.

The flesh produces works. But the Spirit changes who you are. When you read off the list which is the fruit of the Spirit, you will not find any works. You will only find godly qualities.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance, against such there is no law.

Galatians 5:23

And so, the Old Covenant requires works, but the flesh can only produce evil works. In Christ, we are given the Spirit that changes who we are. What a difference.