

NOT MAN'S GOSPEL!
PART 9

TEXT: GALATIANS 2:1-10

April 26, 2009

INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:

Previously, we learned that Paul, in 2:1-10, is continuing to prove the independence of his apostleship from the Jerusalem church and thereby defend the authenticity of his circumcision-free gospel (v. 11) but his focus shifts slightly.

In 1:13-24, Paul argued for the *source* of his gospel. Now in 2:1-10 he is arguing for the *nature* of his gospel.

Paul's gospel was not man's gospel because he received it from the *same source* as the apostles (*Christ not man*) and because it was of the *same nature* as the apostles (*grace not law*).

The true nature of the gospel (i.e., a free promise of life and salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone) is so out of step with fallen man's way of thinking it has to be constantly proclaimed, taught, argued and defended so that it lies at the forefront of our minds and captivates the affections of our hearts.

Paul understood that if the gospel was conditional, such as maintained by the Judaizers, a righteousness besides the righteousness of Christ would become the ground of a sinner's justification. This is why a conditional gospel is so dangerous and destructive to the nature of the gospel.

The gospel is the gospel precisely because it is a free promise devoid of any and all conditions (cf. Gal. 3:8).

However, as soon as works of any kind are introduced as supplemental to the righteousness of Christ for salvation, the true nature of the gospel is destroyed.

Paul, then, was burdened to preserve the truth of the gospel (2:5). He rightly discerned that a conditional gospel (Christ plus) distorts the true gospel (1:7), brings sinners into the judgment of God (1:8-9), destroys the unity of the church (2:1-10), questions the sufficiency of Christ for salvation and renders His atoning work as useless (2:21).

Thus, in order to defend and preserve these things, Paul sets forth three proofs, which demonstrate that the nature of his gospel was identical to the apostles and in full agreement with the Jerusalem Church.

I. PROOF 1: THE JERUSALEM LEADERSHIP DIDN'T SUMMON PAUL TO JERUSALEM
(2:1-2)

Far from being commanded by the apostles, Paul says that he went up to Jerusalem because God told him to go (2:2a). And, when he arrived, the apostles didn't correct him, rebuke him or modify his gospel in any way.

Rather, he says that he set the gospel before them in private (2:2b) and that he did so "in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain," (2:2c).

Paul was not concerned in regard to the *veracity* of his gospel but rather its *viability* (i.e., having the ability to grow, develop and flourish among the Gentiles).

After 14 years of preaching the gospel among the Gentiles, Paul didn't now begin to have personal doubts about the truth of his gospel and thus sought confirmation and assurance from the apostles in Jerusalem. This would run counter to his entire argument and insistence on the exclusive truth of his gospel (1:6-9; 1:11-2:21).

Paul's concern was that his ministry could have been severely wounded (rendered fruitless/ineffective) by the continual attacks of the Judaizers. John Stott noting why Paul went up to Jerusalem writes, "It was to overthrow their influence (i.e., the Judaizers-J.F.), not to strengthen his own conviction, that he laid his gospel before the Jerusalem apostles," (*Galatians*, p. 41).

This brings us to the second proof for the authenticity of Paul's gospel.

LESSON:

II. PROOF 2: THE JERUSALEM LEADERSHIP DIDN'T REQUIRE TITUS TO BE CIRCUMCISED (2:3-5)

Whatever concern Paul may have had over whether he had or had not run in vain, he now makes clear (cf. Morris, *Galatians*, p. 67; Burton, *Galatians*, p. 75).

This is the first time in Galatians that Paul introduces the subject of circumcision. The topic of circumcision was a hotly debated, pressing issue wherever he traveled (cf. Rom. 2:25-29; 4:9-12; Philip. 3:2-5; Col. 2:11, 13).

The issue of circumcision raises some important questions:

- Why circumcision?
- What was circumcision?
- Why was it such a big deal?
- Why did it plague Paul wherever he went?

A further matter that complicates the issue of circumcision is that it is no longer a topic of debate or controversy in our culture. When is the last time you picked up a book on the topic of circumcision at your local Christian bookstore?

However, the underlying issue of circumcision continues to assault the truth of the gospel in our day and is thus still applicable and relevant for us.

Therefore, in order to truly grasp the significance of the issue of Titus and the wider problem that Paul is addressing in Galatians, it will be helpful for us to first examine circumcision in order to understand it and its relevance to our day.

A. THE ORIGIN OF CIRCUMCISION, GEN. 17:1-14

Circumcision was not unique to the Jews alone. Other cultures in ancient times also practiced circumcision (*New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, p. 411). Though the exact origin of circumcision is debated among scholars, the theological significance of circumcision is first introduced in Genesis 17 (*NDBT*, p. 411).

God, in Genesis 17, instituted the practice of circumcision in response to the covenant He made with Abraham in Genesis 15. As we will come to see, God instituted circumcision into the Abrahamic Covenant after Abraham believed and was justified through faith in God's promises.

B. THE PURPOSE OF CIRCUMCISION, GEN. 17:11; ROM. 4:9-12; GAL. 3:8

Why did God institute circumcision? Circumcision was given by God to serve as a *sign* (Gen. 17:11) for the promise He made to Abraham that through his offspring all the nations would be blessed (Gen. 15:1-5). Paul reveals that this blessing is justification through faith (Gal. 3:8).

Circumcision was thus instituted by God to serve as a *sign* to distinguish those who were inside or outside of the covenant (i.e., a physical marker of those who truly belonged to the people of God through faith in God's promises; Note: If a Gentile desired to become a Jew, the law required that he also had to be circumcised (cf. Ex. 12:48). Circumcision served as the indispensable mark of belonging to God's people (for helpful and more detailed background, see George, *Galatians*, pp. 142-144).

Well after a millennia, Paul comes along and begins preaching a circumcision-free gospel among the Gentiles, which stirred up strong opposition and debate in the early church.

To a Jew in Paul's day, it was quite unthinkable that God could accept a person apart from circumcision. Circumcision came to be associated as the *sine qua non* of Judaism. The Judaizers maintained, "Why, everyone knows that ever since Abraham, Jew and Gentile alike must be circumcised if they expect to be accepted into the covenant family of God."

Therefore, the pressing question and issue related to the purpose of circumcision that Paul was addressing in Galatians was: Did the Gentiles have to be circumcised in order to become Christians as insisted by the Judaizers (cf. Acts 15:1)? Is a man made right with God by being circumcised? Is or is not circumcision a necessary condition for salvation?

The Judaizers (“false brothers,” cf. 2:4) said yes; Paul said no.

Throughout his ministry, Paul took great care to emphasize that God justified Abraham not by circumcision (i.e., his obedience/works) but rather through faith in His promises (cf., Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:1-5; Gal. 3:6-8). Circumcision clearly was not the means by which Abraham or any person (Jew or Gentile) became a member of the people of God. Abraham was counted as righteous before he was circumcised (Rom. 4:9-12).

However, because of the Jews’ fallen, legalistic hearts, they substituted the thing signified (i.e., the blessing of justification through faith) for the sign itself (i.e., circumcision).

Yet, it is clear, even from the Old Testament, that God never instituted circumcision merely as a physical act for hygiene purposes or strictly as a racial marker indicating national identity, let alone salvation. It was not enough to be physically circumcised (cf. Deut. 10:16; 30:6). In Jeremiah 9:25-26, the prophet Jeremiah makes it abundantly clear that the physical act of circumcision wasn’t sufficient, “²⁵ Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh...”

So, what was the true purpose of circumcision?

In Romans 4:11, Paul says the purpose of circumcision was to serve as “a seal of the righteousness he [Abraham-J.F.] had by faith while he was still uncircumcised...” Just as we are saved by grace through faith so too was Abraham.

The Scriptures are clear that the purpose of circumcision was never intended by God to serve as the basis for salvation. In fact, in Galatians 6:15, Paul indicates that circumcision (type) in the Old Testament pointed to regeneration (antitype) the New Testament. What God was after was a circumcised heart (cf. Deut. 10:16, i.e., a new heart/regeneration which comes by the Holy Spirit, cf. Col. 2:8-11; Titus 3:5). Fred Malone notes, “The reality of physical circumcision is replaced by heart circumcision, making physical circumcision unnecessary,” (*The Baptism of Disciples Alone*, p. 117).

Because of their fallen hearts, the Jews turned their obedience to the law (i.e., circumcision) into the ground of their acceptance with God. As a result, the sign, rather than faith in God’s promise, became the ground of their justification before God.

Circumcision (i.e., obedience to the law) is not necessary in respect to a sinner’s acceptance before God. Christ was circumcised (i.e., kept the law) in accordance with the law for sinners (cf. Lk. 2:21).

Therefore, Paul is clear that God will justify both Jew and Gentile through faith in Christ alone (cf. Rom. 3:30; Gal. 2:16). What truly matters is neither circumcision nor uncircumcision but becoming a new creation (Rom. 2:29; Gal. 6:15; 2 Cor. 5:17), which is possible only through faith alone in the gospel (Rom. 10:5-17).

C. THE ISSUE OF CIRCUMCISION, GAL. 2:16; 5:2-4

This then is Paul's concern over the issue of circumcision in Galatians: He is seeking to preserve the truth of the gospel (2:5) by showing that obedience to the law is not the basis of one's acceptance before God.

As we will come to see in the weeks ahead, Paul will make it crystal clear that "a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ," (2:16).

Paul viewed circumcision as shorthand for the requirement to keep the whole law (Gal. 5:2-4). Those who think they can come into favor with God (i.e., be justified) through receiving circumcision (i.e., keeping the law) are deceived because they must be able to render perfect obedience (Rom. 2:25). Since no one man is capable of rendering perfect obedience (Gal. 5:2-4; cf. Rom. 3:9-20) all that is necessary for justification is faith in Christ alone (Gal. 2:16; 3:10-14).

Paul, therefore, took Titus along with him to Jerusalem, in order to set forth Titus as a test-case for the truth of the gospel.

Titus was the answer to the question, did a Gentile have to be circumcised (i.e., meet the requirements of the law) in order to be justified?

Titus is living proof that both Jews and Gentiles are justified before God in the same way, namely by grace through faith in Christ alone apart from the works of the law, as Peter would later testify at the Jerusalem Council, "we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will," (Acts 15:11).

Paul is utterly committed to defend the truth of the gospel over against a legalistic false gospel of self-justification by circumcision (i.e., by law-keeping).

CONCLUSION:

The default mode of every fallen heart is to turn one's obedience (works/performance) into the ground for one's acceptance (justification) before God.

Yet, we must seek to always recall the simple yet elusive truth of the gospel, which is: You and I are accepted by God, not on the basis of our personal performance, but rather on the basis of the righteousness of Christ alone.

Paul rightly saw that this was the issue in regards to circumcision. He understood that the very integrity of the Christian faith and the eternal salvation of sinners were at stake.

To accept the demand of the "false brothers" for Titus to be circumcised would be to renounce the truth of the gospel (i.e., that justification comes by grace through faith in Christ alone apart from the works of the law).

Paul understood that to make circumcision (i.e., obedience to the law) a requirement for salvation is to render Christ of no value (cf. Gal. 2:21; 5:2).

To be sure, much of a legal spirit remains even in believers even though they are no longer under the law (cf. Gal. 3:25). Since this is true, How do you know if you are guilty of a circumcision-like faith? How do you identify a legal spirit within you? How do you know if you are trusting in Christ alone or in Christ plus?

1. YOU ARE GUILTY OF A CIRCUMCISION-LIKE FAITH WHEN YOU ARE MORE INCLINED TO GROUND YOUR ACCEPTANCE WITH GOD UPON YOUR DUTY AND PERFORMANCE INSTEAD OF CHRIST'S OBEDIENCE FOR YOU.

Practicing spiritual disciplines are good and necessary (e.g., Bible reading, Bible memorization, prayer, fasting, journaling, listening to sermons and/or worship music on your iPod, etc...).

However, when you begin to base your acceptance with God (I'm in favor; walking in the blessing, etc...) on what you do (i.e., spiritual disciplines) rather than in who you trust (i.e., Christ) you are guilty of a circumcision-like faith.

We don't reject the practice of spiritual disciplines. Rather, we reject the notion that the practice of them obtains the forgiveness of sins and brings us into a right standing relationship with God.

Do you tend to trust more in your personal holiness as that which makes you effective in service rather than trusting with restless abandon in the perfect holiness of Christ lived for you as that, which alone ensures your effectiveness and makes all of your imperfect service acceptable to God?

When you derive more comfort from your own performance rather than by the reign of free grace in your life and God's faithfulness toward you, you are guilty of a circumcision-like faith (i.e., of trusting in Christ plus rather than Christ alone for your acceptance and favor before God).

2. YOU ARE GUILTY OF A CIRCUMCISION-LIKE FAITH WHEN YOUR FOCUS IS MORE UPON EVIDENCES OF GRACE IN YOUR LIFE, THAN UPON THE IMPUTED RIGHTEOUSNESS OF CHRIST.

Let me ask you a question: Do you find more comfort in the fact that when you got into an argument with your wife, you kept your cool and didn't retaliate in anger? Or, do you find more comfort in trusting in the fact that Christ was never once guilty of unrighteous anger on your behalf?

Do you feel like God is more pleased with you because you refrained from looking at pornography rather than the fact that Christ lived a sinless life of moral purity for you?

Do you feel like you are more loved by God on your “good days” than on your “bad days?”

Do you think you will come into greater favor with God because your offering is based on your gross rather than net income?

Do you live with a sense of entitlement (i.e., that God should “bless” you) because you did a good deed?

If the answer is yes to all of the above examples, you are guilty of trusting in Christ plus your performance rather than Christ alone. Note carefully that none of the foregoing examples are excuses for sin rather they are excuses for the need of a Savior!

3. YOU ARE GUILTY OF A CIRCUMCISION-LIKE FAITH WHEN YOUR OBEDIENCE IS MORE INFLUENCED BY THE TERRORS AND CURSE OF THE LAW THAN BY THE ALLUREMENT OF GRACE.

Guilt and fear are poor motivators for the Christian life. True obedience comes not from the thundering of the law (Do or die!). Legalism operates on the principle, “I do therefore I am accepted by God.” The gospel operates on the principle, “You are accepted by God on account of Christ alone therefore go do.”

True obedience flows from faith in the gospel, as Paul writes in Romans 1:5, “through whom (i.e., Jesus Christ our Lord, v. 4-J.F.) we have received grace and apostleship to bring about *the obedience of faith* for the sake of his name among all the nations,” (emphasis mine). Slavish, duty-driven obedience flows from fear and guilt. However, true, evangelical obedience flows from faith!

Walter Marshall writes,

“God does not drive you along with whips and terrors, or by the rod of the schoolmaster, the law. Rather, he leads you and draws you to walk in his ways by pleasant attractions (Hosea 11:3-4). The love of Christ...is the greatest and most pleasant attraction to encourage you to godly living (2 Cor. 5:15; Rom. 12:1),” (*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*, p. 236).

What compels your heart to obey God? Are you driven to obey God more out of fear of punishment rather than His favor? Is your heart drawn to obey out of a clear recognition of God’s love and favor upon your life? Obedience out of slavish fear is self-centered. Obedience that flows out of faith’s recognition and reception of the love of God is Christ-centered.

4. YOU ARE GUILTY OF A CIRCUMCISION-LIKE FAITH WHEN YOU LOOK TO WHAT IS PROMISED ONLY IN A CONDITIONAL WAY.

As just noted, the law says, “Do and live.” But, the gospel says, “Live and do.”

God's favor is not based on whether or not you have lived up to some prescribed level of behavior. God's favor is unconditional because Christ met all the conditions of the law for you (Matt. 3:15; 5:17)!

Just like the Judaizers, many believers forget or fail to understand that Christ fulfilled the law for us thus rendering obedience to the law for justification unnecessary.

The gospel is a free promise not a conditional promise. Yet, so many believers live in bondage and slavery to legalism because they don't expect God to fulfill His promises to them unless they have done their part.

1 John 1:9, where John deals with confession of sin, serves as a classic example of this misconception.

This may come as a surprise to some of you, but the truth is we do not confess our sins in order to be forgiven. Our sins are forgiven by grace through faith in Christ alone. Rather, we confess our sins because we are forgiven! Only believers confess sin. Those who fail to confess sin are deceived and the truth of the gospel is not in them (1 John 1:8).

However, we do not confess sin (do our part) so that God will fulfill His promise (forgive and cleanse; do His part).

We confess our sins so that we might have the truth of the gospel applied afresh to our hearts and consciences, thus restoring our assurance and the sweetness of our fellowship with God.

In all of the foregoing examples, this is what we are saying: True saving faith leads a sinner to look totally away from himself and to rest in Christ alone as the sole ground of his acceptance before God.

The simple, liberating, Good News of the gospel is this: We come into favor with God by grace through faith alone, apart from the works of the law. True saving faith in its proper function lays hold of Christ alone and renounces everything else for acceptance and favor before God (cf. Philip. 3:7-11).

Therefore, Paul proclaimed the Good News of Jesus, the Son of God, crucified and risen again for sinners as the only basis for a right standing before God. All that a sinner needs to belong to God is faith in Christ alone!

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