

• Paul's final appeal to abandon legalism

Galatians 5:2–12 contain Paul's final appeal to the Galatians to abandon their interest in going back to the Mosaic law. In verse 13 he will change direction. Remember again the background. Some Jewish agitators had come into the churches and wanted to persuade everyone to abandon Paul's teaching and adopt the Jewish law in its totality into their lives. The starting-point of abandoning Paul's doctrine and going over to the legalists' doctrine would be that the Christian men in Galatia should get themselves circumcised. If the men of the churches of Galatia submit to the demand of circumcision it will signal a major change-over from Paul's teaching to the teaching of the legalists. Paul has restated his gospel ^{□1} and produced many arguments in its favour. ^{□2} From about Galatians 4:8 he has been appealing to them in various ways ^{□3} to abandon legalism. Now comes his last appeal at this point. ^{□4}

□1 2:15–21
□2 3:1 – 4:7
□3 4:8–11, 4:12–20, 4:21 – 5:1
□4 5:2–12

• Circumcision – a signal of being under the law

Sometimes something quite small can signal a major change of outlook. People use flags and badges and stickers of various kind to signal their allegiance to a football team or a political party. There was something similar to this in the conflict between Paul and his enemies. The one thing that would have signalled that the people were putting themselves under the law of Moses would be to get circumcised.

1. Turning to legalism is turning away from Christ

(1) But Paul says, **turning to legalism is turning away from Christ**. Paul speaks very emphatically. 'Look! I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you'. ^{□1} Christ is meant to be an 'advantage' to us. He will profit us; He will bring us benefits. What are the benefits Christ brings us?

□1 5:2

1. Christ teaches us

(i) Christ **teaches us**. He shows us things that we need to know. He leads us to grow in wisdom. He gives us His mind. But to know Christ in this way you have to live on Jesus and not live on tradition or legislation from the law of Moses (or from anywhere else). Christ must be everything to us. Otherwise we shall lose the benefit of Christ.

2. Christ feeds our hearts

(ii) Christ **feeds our hearts**. He feeds the inner life. He gives us a life of joy, a life of peace. He gives us a feeling of being in control of ourselves. We know what we are doing.

3. Christ guides our decisions

(iii) Christ **guides our decisions**. He will show us the way in which we are to go. Christ motivates us. He strengthens our will, our determination.

4. Christ shapes our circumstances

(iv) Christ **shapes our circumstances**. He is not only Lord within our lives; He is Lord of what is happening in the world around us. Everything that is happening to us is within the will of Christ. He is head of the church. He is Lord in the world.

• Turning from Christ to legalism is turning from Christ to sin

But Paul's point is that all of this will be lost in experience if we turn away from Christ to something else. Our spiritual life will dry up. The gentile Galatians were in danger of turning to a massive adoption of Jewish culture and Jewish legislation. But if they do this they will be backing away from Christ without realizing it. It does not mean that Christ will abandon them, for He will never do that to His people. The freedom of Galatians 5:1 includes freedom from the fear of losing salvation. But nevertheless turning from Christ to legalism is like turning from Christ to sin.

• Channels of grace are blocked

Legalism is sin! It will mean that the channels of Christ's grace get blocked up and we cease to experience Him as we ought. The Lord Jesus Christ does not like to have a rival! He does not like it if we look to other sources of spiritual life, besides Himself. Not even the holy law of God given to Israel can be a rival to the Lord Jesus Christ within our lives. If we try to live under the Mosaic system, we are actually bringing in a rival to the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. We cannot pick and choose from the law

(2) **We cannot pick and choose what we want from law of God**. 'I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is required to keep the whole law'. ^{□1} Actually no one ever can live with the whole law. Even people who think they admire the Mosaic law, in practise only like some bits and pieces from it. Perhaps they like what they call 'the moral law', but we should remember

□1 5:3

• The law does not go far

that Jesus' teachings about godliness go **higher** than what might be called 'the moral law'. If we listen to Jesus He will ask things of us that were not mentioned in

enough

• The law is an entire system – all or nothing

the Mosaic law. In Galatia perhaps the agitators were specially interested in the nationalistic and cultural pieces of the law (the Sabbath, holy days, food laws, and so on). There are people who love the external morality of the law. They love telling people not to kill or lie or steal! They specially love the command ‘You shall not commit adultery’, and they talk as if it were the only bit of God’s law! Of course, there is nothing wrong with the holy law of God at **those** points – except that they do not go far enough! But law-lovers are often full of gossip and slander and hate of the worst kind! The Pharisees who engineered the murder of Jesus loved the law of God! But such people pick and choose what they want from the law of God. Actually, says Paul, if you want to be under the law of God, you have to be under all of it. It comes as a totality! It comes as an entire system given to Israel through Moses. You cannot choose the bits of it that you like. The Galatians thought they could perhaps go along a little way with the legalistic critics of Paul. Paul says, ‘Once you start with circumcision, you are committing yourself to an entire lifestyle of Jewishness and detailed obedience to Jewish masters!’

3. Disaster will follow the route recommended by Paul’s enemies

(3) **It will be a disaster if the Galatians follow the route recommended by Paul’s enemies.** Verse 4 is similar to verse 2, except that Paul speaks of what is already happening. *‘You are Alienated from Christ, you who would be justified by the law. You fell away from grace.’* ¹ It had already begun to happen. The Galatians had not lost their salvation, but they had lost their **experience** of the gospel, because they are trying to be ‘righteous’ before God in the wrong way. The joyful power of the Holy Spirit had become less in their lives. They were not experiencing God’s grace in the way they had done before.

¹ 5:4

4. The true way forward is to persist in faith

• Paul is talking about godly living in the present

• Our expectation that we shall live godly lives

(4) **The true way to go forward is to persist in faith.** We shall not experience God’s grace if we walk the route of legalism, says Paul. *‘For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.’* ¹ We must follow Paul’s argument here. He is not thinking of the distant future, or the time of Jesus’ Second Coming. There has been nothing of that kind anywhere in Galatians so far, and Paul is surely not talking about what might be in the distant future. He is in the middle of talking of what we can get from the Lord Jesus Christ right now, and how Jesus’ blessings for us will be blocked if we lapse into unbelief by turning back to Mosaic ways. Surely what he is referring to here is the hope of godly living. It is not by law that we expect to be righteous. It is

¹ 5:5

(i) by the Holy Spirit, and
(ii) by persistent faith, that we expect to make progress. Having begun with the Spirit, we continue with the Spirit. Having begun in faith, we continue in faith. The result of legalism is lost fellowship with Christ. The result of persistent faith is the rich and full working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The ‘hope of righteousness’ means (if the context and flow of argument is the key) the expectation that we shall live godly lives. We trust the Lord Jesus Christ. We obey the Holy Spirit. We start walking in the way God leads us. And we eagerly expect the results to show themselves in our lives.



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