

14. Learning the Difference between Legalism and Liberty

In our last topic, we saw that we want to help our physical and spiritual children learn why some Christians fail to grow and become “adult sons and daughters”. We saw that this happened in Galatia when false teachers came into the area of Galatia and started teaching the new Christians that they had to keep the Jewish law in order to be saved or to grow in Christ. Since many new Christians are still being deceived by people who try to add many rules about the way to live the Christian life, we want to help our physical and spiritual children learn how to explain the difference between legalism and liberty to help new and weak Christians grow in their spiritual lives. That will be the focus of our topic today.

Paul asked the new Christians that were turning to the Jewish law a very important question in Galatians 4:21. Paul said, “Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law?” Many Christians like to depend on the law because they have never learned to be led by the Holy Spirit. They just try to follow the law in their own strength. Some churches also set many rules for the people in those churches to follow. However, Galatians 5:18 says, “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.” We want to help our children learn to understand and explain to others that people are either driven by the fear that is the result of laws and rules or they are led by the Spirit. People are driven by fear because they fear what other people might say or think. Those who are led by the love of Christ do not fear other people.

The problem that people face when they try to follow the law is that they fail and sin. Romans 7:19-20 says, “For the good that I will *to do*, I do not do; but the evil I will not *to do*, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not *to do*, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.” As a result of such failures, many of those who try to follow the law would summarize their Christian life in the words of Romans 7:24 which says, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Here, we see that those who try to follow the law have many inner conflicts in their lives. That is why Paul asked if those who desired to follow the law really understood what they desired.

As a result, Paul used an illustration to give an example of the difference between legalism and liberty. Galatians 4:22-26 says, “For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. But he *who was* of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar—for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children—but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all.” When people try to follow the law, they are depending on their own efforts. That is why the bondwoman is compared to the flesh.

Abraham had one son that was born to a bondwoman or slave named Hagar. His second son was born to a freewoman, his wife, Sarah. Paul said that these two women were like the two covenants. The first covenant was like Mount Sinai which was the place where the law was given. Paul said that the law which was given at Mount Sinai produced bondage. The Jews in Jerusalem were

trying to follow the law. Paul said that in their efforts to follow the law, the Jews were actually in bondage because they could not keep the law. In contrast, the second covenant pictured the heavenly Jerusalem where those who follow Christ will experience eternal life. Paul said that the heavenly Jerusalem pictures the liberty that we are to experience as we follow Christ.

We saw that Romans 7 pictures the results when Christians are depending on their own strength to live the Christian life. It produced fear and failure. In the first seven chapters of Romans, the Holy Spirit is only mentioned once. In Romans 8, the Holy Spirit is mentioned 19 times. As a result, the final verses of Romans 8 picture the liberty that we have as we walk in the love that God showed us through the death and resurrection of Christ. Romans 8:37-39 says, “Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Here, we see that we will get to know and understand the love of God for us as we learn to be led by the Holy Spirit. When we are led by the Spirit, we see here that we are more than conquerors.

As a result, those Christians that are learning to experience the liberty that the Holy Spirit provides find that they begin to experience lives of joy and peace. Galatians 4:27-28 says, “For it is written: ‘Rejoice, O barren, *You* who do not bear! Break forth and shout, *You* who are not in labor! For the desolate has many more children than she who has a husband.’ Now we, brethren, as Isaac *was*, are children of promise.” Here, we see that the Lord gives great joy to those who are learning to yield to the Holy Spirit. That is the joy that we want to help new Christians experience as we show them how to be led by the Holy Spirit instead of being driven by the fear of people.

Paul wanted the new Christians in Galatia to understand that they did not need to continue to live in bondage to the law as these false teachers were telling them when they said that the new Christians needed to follow the Jewish law. Instead, God wanted those new Christians to understand that they had been set free from the law. We want to help others understand the difference between being in bondage to the law and being set free from the law. This is exactly why we want to help our physical and spiritual children to understand Christian liberty so clearly that they can explain this liberty to new Christians. We want them to be able to help new Christians understand what it means to be the children of promise.

Paul realized that those who were teaching the new Christians that they had to be circumcised and follow the Jewish law were trying to bring those new Christians back into bondage. As a result, Paul said in Galatians 4:29, “But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him *who was born* according to the Spirit, even so *it is* now.” Those who are depending on the laws and rules of men are not happy to see those who are learning to enjoy the freedom that comes from being born of the Holy Spirit. That is why they first try to bring new Christians back under the bondage of the rules of men.

When those who are depending on laws realize that they cannot bring new Christians back under the rules of men, they begin to persecute those who have been born of the Holy Spirit. Paul had

already spent time in Galatia preparing the new Christians for persecution. Acts 14:21-22 says, “And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting *them* to continue in the faith, and *saying*, ‘We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.’” Here, we see Paul and Barnabas realized that a key part of their ministry was to prepare the new Christians for the fact they would experience many tribulations.

In the same way, a key part of our ministry to our physical and spiritual children is to prepare them for many tribulations. We also want to show them by our example how to help new Christians prepare for many tribulations. A key part of that preparation is to help younger Christians fully understand the difference between legalism and liberty. Paul told the Galatians in Galatians 4:30-31, “Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? ‘Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.’ So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.” Here, we see that we want to help our children learn to set new Christians free from the bondage of the law. Our next several topics will help them learn how to help new Christians learn to be led by the Holy Spirit.

As Paul shared with the Christians in Galatia who were being confused by the false teachers, he reminded them that it was time to cast out the bondwoman and her son. Here, we see that it is time to show new Christians that they can never grow by the law just as they could never be saved by the law. Instead, new Christians grow by having their whole way of thinking transformed by the Word of God. Romans 12:2 says, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” As the minds of new Christians are being transformed by the Word of God, they begin to view the things of the world from the viewpoint of God instead of the viewpoint of the world.

The Lord said in Isaiah 55:8-9, “‘For My thoughts *are* not your thoughts, nor *are* your ways My ways,’ says the LORD. ‘For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.’” We want to show our children how to think the thoughts of God instead of thinking the thoughts of the world. The thoughts of the world are based on the fear, guilt and shame that are the result of sin. The thoughts of God are much higher than the thoughts of the world. As a result, as we help our children to learn, understand and apply the thoughts of God in their own lives, they are being equipped to help many others throughout their lives. The key is that we must help them to understand and apply the thoughts of God to their lives and not just learn them. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children learn to understand and apply the Word of God to their lives so that they experience true liberty.