

# Beware of Legalism

Galatians 2:1-10

In our study of Galatians, chapter 1, we considered the story of the apostle Paul, who was called by God to bring the Gospel of Christ to the nations and who was arguably the greatest of theologians. In Galatians, Paul confronts growing attacks on the Truth that were coming from within the Christian churches themselves.

Remember that Paul wrote to the Galatians to warn them to beware of the false teachings of the Judaizers. Who were the Judaizers? The Judaizers were Jews who claimed to be Christians; they claimed to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, but they also claimed that Gentiles had to become like the Jews in order to be saved. The Judaizers argued that those who were not ethnically Jewish could not become Christians unless they kept the works of the law of Moses. They said that in order to be a Christian, you must be circumcised and keep the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, including its dietary restrictions and its holy days and festivals.

In this study, we are going to return to Paul's epistle of Galatians in order to take a closer look at the Judaizers and their counterfeit gospel. Our text is Galatians 2:1-10:

"Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with *me*. 2 And I went up by revelation, and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain. 3 Yet not even Titus who *was* with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. 4 And *this occurred* because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), 5 to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you. 6 But from those who seemed to be something -- whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God shows personal favoritism to no man -- for those who seemed *to be something* added nothing to me. 7 But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as *the gospel* for the circumcised *was* to Peter 8 (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles), 9 and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we *should go* to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. 10 *They desired* only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do." (New King James translation)

Hear the Lord say to you, **beware of legalism!**

## What is legalism?

**Legalism** may be defined as **adding** manmade, humanly-devised requirements to the Gospel or to God's Word.

No Christian and no church has the right to bind one's conscience to such manmade laws. As Martin Luther said, the Christian's conscience is to be held captive to the Word of God alone.

Chapter 20 of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* speaks of Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience. In paragraph 2, it explains that God alone is Lord of the conscience. He has left our consciences **free** from manmade doctrines and commandments, which **in any way contradict** God's Word, **or, in regard to matters of faith or worship, add to God's Word**. To believe such man-made doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience. . . . So we are not to believe or practice anything that contradicts God's Word. And, in matters of faith or worship, we must only believe and practice that which is commanded by God in His Word. In worship, this is called "the regulative principle."

The Judaizers claimed to be Christians. They had converted from Judaism to Christianity, and many of them were members in good standing in Christian churches. Yet, they were **legalists**. They believed in and taught a false gospel based on **faith plus works**. They taught that faith alone was not sufficient for salvation. Gentiles had to be circumcised, observe Jewish dietary laws, and observe Jewish holy days and festivals in order to become true Christians. In Galatians, Paul counters that the one, true Gospel comes **by God's grace alone** and is received **by faith alone in Christ alone**. The Gospel teaches that we are justified by faith alone, **apart from** works, **apart from** performing the works of the law.

Let us now consider **Galatians 2, verse 1**: Paul says, "Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with *me*."

Paul returned to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus. Barnabas accompanied the apostle Paul on his first missionary journey (Acts 4:36). Titus was one of Paul's trusted companions and messengers. Paul wrote one of his pastoral epistles to Titus, calling him "a true son in *our* common faith" (Titus 1:4).

**Paul continues in Galatians 2:2**: "And I went up by revelation, and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain."

The Holy Spirit summoned Paul to Jerusalem. There he met privately with those who were of reputation, that is, with Peter, James, and John—who were the

three main leaders of the Jerusalem church. Paul sought to avoid unnecessary conflict with the other apostles. So he sought to admonish them privately, reminding them of the mystery of the Gospel. Paul hoped that the other apostles would support his ministry to the Gentiles and take a stand against the legalistic teaching of the Judaizers.

Paul's law-free gospel is summarized in Galatians 2:16, which is the theme verse for the entire book of Galatians: "knowing that a man is **not** justified by the works of the law **but by faith** in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified **by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law**; for by the works of the law **no** flesh shall be justified."

The Judaizer heresy Paul confronts in Galatians 2 is the same heresy confronted by the Jerusalem Council, as recorded by Luke in Acts 15. We read in Acts 15 that "certain *men* came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."" Some Pharisees taught, "It is necessary to circumcise [the Gentiles], and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5).

The apostles met in Jerusalem with the pastors and elders of the region to respond to this most pivotal doctrinal question. The Jerusalem assembly appointed a commission, composed of Paul, Barnabas, Judas and Silas, and sent them to Antioch with their ruling. In their ruling the churches, as represented by their elders and the apostles, clearly stated that they had NEVER commanded that Gentiles must be circumcised or keep the ceremonial law. (Acts 15:23-29)

**Galatians 2:3** Yet not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised.

In the book of Acts, we read that Paul instructed his young disciple Timothy to be circumcised. Timothy's mother was a Jewish believer, but his father was Greek. So Timothy was circumcised *not* in order to become a Christian but rather so that he might fit in better among the Jewish people to whom he was called to minister.

The situation in Galatians was quite different. The Judaizers were adding circumcision to the Gospel, as a requirement for salvation; they argued that Gentiles had to be circumcised in order to be Christians and full members of God's covenant people. Therefore, in order to demonstrate their rejection of this false teaching, Paul and the apostles refused to require Titus to be circumcised. Titus's example teaches us two important lessons: First, keeping the law and doing good works are not prerequisites for salvation. And, second, circumcision, as a symbol of God's covenant, has been abolished and replaced by new covenant baptism.

Under the old covenant, circumcision had been the final step in the conversion of a male Gentile to the Jewish religion. Although God commanded that all Jews

must be circumcised, physical circumcision was not a means of earning salvation; it never actually made someone a true believer. Paul says in Romans, chapter 9, “For they are not all Israel who are *descended* from Israel . . . it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants” (6-8, NAS).

Even more clearly, Paul explains in Romans 2:28-29: “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. **But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit**, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.”

The true Israel of God consists of all believers in Christ, both Jew and Gentile. According to the New Testament, it is faith in Christ, not ethnicity or circumcision, that makes a person a true Israelite. A true Jew is a spiritual Jew who has a circumcised heart. A true Jew has trusted in Christ as Savior and Lord, and he has received Christ’s imputed righteousness, which comes by faith alone. A true Jew does not seek man’s praise; rather, he seeks to please God.

For old covenant believers, circumcision, like baptism under the new covenant, was a sign and seal of the righteousness that comes by faith (cf. Rom. 4:11). Circumcision pointed to one’s need for spiritual circumcision. “And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live” (Deuteronomy 30:6).

Yet, now, the New Testament clearly teaches that the rite of circumcision has lost all its religious importance, all its spiritual value.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:19: “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God *is what matters*.”

Likewise, in Galatians 5:6, he writes, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. **The only thing that counts is faith** expressing itself through love” (NIV). He adds in Galatians 6:15: “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; **what counts is a new creation**.”

Paul writes in Philippians 3:2-3: “Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision [or “those mutilators of the flesh”]; for we are the *true* circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (NAS).

Christ has abolished circumcision as a religious rite. Therefore, as Christians, circumcision no longer should hold any spiritual or religious meaning for us. What matters to God is keeping His commandments and worshipping in the Spirit of God, which includes partaking of water baptism. The New Testament teaches that Christians are to receive water baptism, not circumcision, as the sign and

seal of God's covenant. As Christians, we are to glory in Christ alone and put no confidence in the flesh. To require circumcision is to deny the Christian New Testament.

So why was Titus being pressured to be circumcised?

Paul answers this question in verse 4:

**Galatians 2:4-5** And *this occurred* because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), 5 to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.

This is how legalists work—in secret, stealthily. Legalists are often very sneaky, inching their way into churches so that they may “spy out” our Christian liberty and bring us into bondage.

Paul warns us to **beware of legalism**. As Christians, we are called to be on guard, to watch and pray, to be sober-minded, to be vigilant. The devil is working feverishly to attack, to corrupt, to pollute, to defile, to destroy the Church of Jesus Christ. God calls us to stand our ground as good soldiers of Christ, fighting for the liberty Christ has purchased for us at the cost of His own blood!

The Judaizers claimed to be true Christians and virtually no one in the church was discerning enough to see that they were not. Yet, in reality, the Judaizers were not true Christians; they were not brothers in Christ at all. Rather, they were “false brethren.” They were traitors. Pastor John MacArthur refers to them as “Satan’s undercover agents sent into the midst of the church to sabotage the true gospel” (*MacArthur Study Bible*, p. 1790).

Paul says that they did not cave in to the pressure of the Judaizers. No, Titus, Paul, and the Church “did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with [them]” (NAS).

So what’s wrong with adding just a few, seemingly minor requirements to the Gospel or to God’s Word?

Paul says that the very TRUTH of the Gospel is at stake! This is no minor issue!

The Reformation Study Bible explains that “Any attempt to add entrance requirements, such as circumcision [to the Gospel or to membership in Christ’s Church], is a denial of the sufficiency of faith in Christ’s merits for satisfying God’s justice, and therefore is a perversion of the gospel” (p. 1849).

The Bible teaches us that by nature we are spiritually dead from birth. The dead cannot raise themselves from the dead. In order to be saved, God must

sovereignly act to breathe life into us by His Spirit, making us willing and able to believe. By God's grace, we then trust in Christ's works alone to save us from our sins. We are justified by faith, apart from the works of the law. We are saved by Christ's merits, not our own. The good news is that Jesus saves His people from their sins.

Paul saw the Judaizers' teaching as a serious threat to the Gospel. John Calvin called justification by faith alone "the main hinge on which religion turns." Martin Luther called it "the doctrine by which the church stands or falls." For the apostle Paul, justification by faith alone was a core component of the Gospel; all those who rejected this doctrine were not true Christians; they were "false brethren," false brothers.

**Beware of legalism.** Never let any church or professing Christian enslave you to man-made commandments and an impossible system of salvation by works. If you have trusted in Christ alone for salvation, He has set you free. "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). Christians are free from the law as a means of salvation, free from its external ceremonial regulations, and free from its eternal curse for disobedience, for Christ has paid the infinite penalty that was rightfully ours (cf. *MacArthur Study Bible*, p. 1790).

Paul says, "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1, NAS).

Why did Christ set us free? So that we should go on sinning? Of course not.

We are to use our freedom to serve one another in love.

Paul says, "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love" (Gal. 5:13, NIV).

Paul was contending earnestly for the truth of the gospel, even if he stood against the whole world and much of the Church establishment. Such was the case of John Wycliff, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, Ebenezer Erskine, JC Ryle, Charles Spurgeon, and all the brave reformers who stood in their generation for the true, law-free gospel. And so we also must be brave, bold, and courageous in standing for God and His one, true Gospel today!

**Galatians 2:6** But from those who seemed to be something -- whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God shows personal favoritism to no man -- for those who seemed *to be something* added nothing to me.

James, Peter, and John were the leaders of the Jerusalem church. Unlike Peter and John, Paul was not one of Jesus' twelve disciples. The Judaizers were seeking to use this fact to undermine Paul's authority. However, Paul declares

his equality with them, for he was likewise chosen by God as an apostle, and God shows no favoritism.

The Holy Spirit summoned Paul to Jerusalem to confront the other apostles, for they (or at least Peter) were falling into the trap of legalism. In Galatians, chapter 2, verses 11-16, we see that Paul was bold enough to oppose even the apostle Peter publicly, to his face (verse 11). Seeing that he along with Barnabas and those who claimed to come from James were caving in to the Judaizers and suppressing the truth of the Gospel, Paul confronts the apostle Peter for his hypocrisy in giving in to the Jewish distortion of the Gospel (2:11-16).

In his book *The Truth War: Fighting for Certainty in an Age of Deception*, John MacArthur observes that key leaders in the early church, including the apostle Peter, were slow to discern the danger in the teachings of the Judaizers:

Galatians 2 is Paul's description of his obviously frustrating struggle to get the other apostles and key church leaders to take this heresy as seriously as he did. That is the same chapter where Paul recounts the famous incident in Antioch when he had to rebuke Peter publicly. He did so because Peter seemed to lend credibility and encouragement to the Judaizers. . . . the realization that even an apostle like Peter could be temporarily fooled by the subtlety of these false teachers ought to make us even *more* alert to the potential evils of seemingly "small" errors that can so easily undermine the heart of gospel truth.<sup>1</sup>

Peter apparently repented of his folly. Peter himself testified in Acts 10 that "God is not one to show partiality" or favoritism, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him (Acts 10:34-35, NAS). He similarly defended the Gentiles before the Jerusalem Council in Acts, chapter 15, arguing that God makes "no distinction" between Jew and Gentile, for He purifies both "their hearts by faith." Gentiles do not need to be circumcised or keep the ceremonial law, for salvation comes only "through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 15:7-11).

**We must be on guard against false teaching.** Ever since the days of Paul, Christian churches have been plagued by an abandonment of the Truth. Paul confronted the Corinthian church, saying, "But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or *if* you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted -- you may well put up with it! . . ." (2 Corinthians 11:3-5; cf. 12:11)

**We must beware of legalism.**

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<sup>1</sup> (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), pp. 86, 88.

We must beware of adding to or subtracting from God's Word.

We must beware of adding works to the pure Gospel of Christ.

Paul says in verse 6 that "God shows personal favoritism to no man".

The world esteems those who are rich and famous.

The world esteems popular musicians and athletes.

The world esteems those who have doctorate degrees or Ph.D.s.

The world esteems pastors of churches with 20 or 30,000 members

The world esteems outward forms of religion.

But God is not impressed with any of these things. God "shows personal favoritism to no man." Paul warns in Galatians 6:3, "For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself." He adds in Galatians 6:14: "God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." Obviously, Paul was not seeking the world's esteem or even self-esteem. What he sought was God's esteem; He sought to be faithful to Christ alone.

God is not even impressed by the fact that you can quote from Scripture or the Westminster Confession of Faith or that you have been faithful church members for years. **There is only one thing that God wants to know about you**—do you believe, confess, and practice the truth or a lie? Are you a witness to the pure Gospel, or have you fallen into the snare of the devil?

Beware of legalism. Beware of counterfeit gospels.

**Paul continues in Galatians 2:7-9** "But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as *the gospel* for the circumcised *was* to Peter (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles), and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we *should go* to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised."

Paul refers to James, Jesus' half-brother (Gal. 1:19), who was a leader in the Jerusalem church, as well as Cephas (Peter) and John, who were two of Jesus' closest disciples and had come to be the main apostles in the Jerusalem church. James, Peter, and John seemed to be pillars, establishing and supporting the church, but their lack of discernment in regard to the teaching of the Judaizers was putting the purity of the Gospel at great risk.

Paul acknowledges that Peter, despite his weakness and poor judgment as later described in this chapter, was indeed an apostle sent by God. Peter was sent by God to preach the gospel to the Jews, the circumcised (1 Pet. 1:1). Paul

primarily was an apostle to the Gentiles, “the uncircumcised” (Acts 9:15; 13:46; 22:21). Both Peter and Paul served the same Lord Jesus Christ and were given the same Gospel to proclaim.

To the chagrin of the Judaizers, the Jerusalem church, as represented by James, Peter, and John, affirmed Paul’s apostleship, giving him and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, and they agreed that the Gospel Paul preached was indeed the one, true Gospel.

**We conclude our study with Galatians 2:10:** *They desired* only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do.”

Paul reminds us that in fighting for doctrinal truth, we must never neglect the work of mercy and compassion. Paul, like the Lord he served, had a special concern for the poor, especially the poor in the Church, and so also must we.

### **Beware of legalism.**

Paul’s epistle to the Galatians repeatedly warns us of the dangers of legalism. As Christians, we must stand on guard against any attempts to add manmade, humanly-invented requirements to the Gospel or God’s Word. Do not give in to it. Rather, stand fast in the liberty by which Christ has made you free!

Paul repeatedly reminds us of the one, true Gospel, which teaches that we are justified by faith alone in Christ alone.

### **Have you trusted in Christ alone for salvation?**

Do not trust in your own goodness, your own works, your own merits. Trust in Christ alone, in His merits, in His perfect works, in His cross work, as your only hope of eternal life.

**The apostle Paul suffered, as did our Lord Jesus, for the Truth of the Gospel** and for the salvation of a great multitude of Jewish and Gentile believers.

May we never give in to legalism.

May we never pervert or distort the pure gospel of God’s grace.

May we trust in Christ alone as the only Savior and Redeemer of men.

**Beware of false gospels, beware of false teachers, and beware of legalism!**