



GETTING THE GOSPEL RIGHT (GTGR) (GAL 5:1-12)

As discussed in previous studies, the reason Paul wrote the book of Galatians was so that the churches in that region could/would get the gospel right. This then is the letter's overarching general/main theme: Getting the Gospel Right. As such, every principle/truth established in the letter has this as its purpose (GTGR!). This is most especially the case for those truths/principles dealing with the doctrine of justification, since this is at the heart of Paul's concern for the Galatians. Through the false/heretical teaching of others (i.e. Peter and the Judaizers), the Galatians were under the impression that gaining justification (or a right standing before God) under the New Covenant required more than simple faith in Christ. It required also observing the former means of justification: the Old Covenant clean laws (i.e. "the works of the law"). However, such wrong views of justification extended beyond what a person must do to gain it. There was also heresy related to what person must do to maintain it. Though foreign to those preaching observance of the Old Covenant clean laws, there were nonetheless those within the Christianity of Paul's day preaching that once a person had gained justification through faith in Christ, no observance of the Law to any degree, was necessary. Not only had the Old Covenant clean laws been replaced (or fulfilled through such faith in Christ), but so had the moral commands. In other words, justification gained did not need to be maintained through observance/obedience to any of God's Laws. It is therefore in the direction of this gospel heresy that Paul sets his sights in chapters 5 and 6. Having spent the last three chapters (2-4) explaining the superiority of the justification gained under the New Covenant (versus that gained under the Old), Paul now sets his sights (in 5 and 6) on how this New Covenant justification is to be maintained. The first way represents number 16 in the list of GTGR principles/truths established by the book.

16. GTGR requires a proper understanding of spiritual slavery (1-12).

(1) = As an aspect of both GTGR and maintaining one's justification, Paul launches into a warning against slavery ("do not submit again to a yoke of slavery"). And the slavery Paul has in mind is entirely spiritual. In this case, it is the spiritual slavery of observing the OC clean laws (WOTL).

16.1. That this is indeed the kind of slavery is confirmed by:

16.1.1. His mention of the OC clean law "circumcision" in verses 2 and 3; and "being justified by the law" (shorthand for WOTL) in verse 4.

16.1.2. His use of the word slavery or a similar word to refer to the Galatians' consideration of the OC clean laws elsewhere in the book (4:9-10).

16.1.3. His explicit connection of freedom to the New Covenant and slavery to the Old Covenant in the prior verses (4:21-31).

16.1.4. His statement "For freedom Christ has set us free" is a clear allusion to an earlier identification of Christ as the One Who frees (or "redeems") us from the WOTL (3:13, 4:3-5).

16.2. Why Paul refers to observing the OC clean laws (WOTL) as "slavery" (meaning again spiritual slavery):

16.2.1. Because as was common in physical slavery, the WOTL placed a "yoke" (or burden) on the individual (in this case a moral burden) which was hard to bear (Act 15:10; Rom 7:18).

16.2.2. Because as was also common in physical slavery, the WOTL ended in death to those who remained under it (2, 4) = the negative phrases in each of these verses all communicate a very real form of death: the "death"/loss of their former relationship w/Christ (2- "Christ will be of no advantage to you"; 4 - "You have been severed from Christ"); the loss of their justified state (of grace) before God (4 - "you have fallen from grace").

*As discussed in the past, many today balk at the possibility of losing one's justification believing instead that once a person is justified it cannot be forfeited. This however does not square with Paul's prior testimony regarding the Galatians (3:1-6, 4:9-10), nor what is communicated now. How could Paul warn of being severed from Christ or falling from grace? Such words assume (demand!) a prior relationship w/Christ and experience w/grace!

16.3. This then was the danger associated w/the Galatians beginning to observe the OC clean laws (2 - "if you accept circumcision"; 4 - "you who would be justified by the law" - both phrases are present tense indicating they have not yet taken the fatal step) = Spiritual slavery leading to spiritual death.

16.4. How what Paul is teaching relates (or is relevant) to us today (in GTGR) (Rom15:4; 2Ti 3:16) = Just as the Galatians' fall back into spiritual slavery would put them jeopardy of forfeiting their justification gained through faith in Christ, so it with us. In other words, maintaining our justification through the avoidance of those things today which will place us into spiritual slavery/bondage is just as an imperative/important a task as it was for the Galatians. It too is key to GTGR. Fortunately for us, what remains in the verses under this GTGR truth provide the answer to doing that very thing.

16.5. How to avoid spiritual slavery (i.e. how to maintain what we have gained):

16.5.1. By being committed to sound theology (versus popular theology).

(1a) “For freedom Christ has set us free, stand firm (στήκω = be w/o movement; do not vacillate or change your mind) **therefore”** = Paul is fond of speaking this way when referring to the sound theology (or the sound gospel) established by him in the various churches – especially when such sound doctrine was under attack (Phi 1:27, 4:1; 1Th 3:8 w/2:14-15; 2Th 2:14-15). Most certainly then this is case in Galatians 5:1. Paul is attempting through verbal force (στήκω is in the imperative) to keep the Galatians committed to the sound theology/gospel message they had heard (and was being communicated through this letter) rather than giving in to popular theology (i.e. the theology of the masses; the best-seller; the theology/message being preached by the high profile people). At the time Paul writes this, popular theology was the property of Peter and the Judaizers. Though hard for us to fathom today, their WOTL gospel was highly successful (esp. among the Jews). It is what made Peter and co. the first Christian rock-stars¹. Unfortunately, what was true then is true now also: popular theology produces bondage (i.e. it fails to save/help those who embrace it. It serves only to further enslave them). Examples from the popular theology of today that lead to spiritual slavery = the health and wealth gospel (people are enslaved to coveting/idolatry – Col 3:5 = I am the one who determines what is best for me); the way many interpret these first four verses in Galatians 5 as freedom from obedience to all of the law² (i.e. from the slavery of merit-based Judaism³. Such thinking not only condemns them – Mat 5:19, but enslaves them to sin – another form of spiritual bondage – Gal 4:8; 2Pe 2:19; Rom 6:16-17); the idea that salvation is about the individual⁴ (the Church is despised and neglected resulting in their apostasy – Act 20:28; Mat 16:19; Heb 6:4-6, 10:19-30; Mat 12:32 w/Joh 20:22-23).

16.5.2. By treating as necessity (non-negotiable) only those things that truly save (i.e. that advance your heavenly endeavors – Rom 2:6-7)

(1b) “do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” = As already mentioned, sin is a form of spiritual slavery – which is why Paul attaches the word “again” to his prohibition. The Galatians were in bondage to sin when pagans, making this new enslavement a “2nd time” (4:8). That being said, it is the prohibition itself that reveals yet another key to avoiding it. Based on the back-story (or historical context), what Paul means by the phrase, “do not submit” is “do not treat as a necessity” (i.e. do not treat as necessary the WOTL). As further support that this is indeed what Paul is attempting to communicate consider (Act 21:20-24). WOTL therefore were permissible, but only if viewed as optional (Gal 6:15; 1Co 7:19, 8:8; Heb 13:9). Once taken to the level of necessary to salvation or one’s advancement in spiritual things (i.e. as non-negotiable), they became just the opposite (i.e. damning bondage). And the same is true for us as well. As such, anything that is not necessary to our salvation (i.e. the advancement of our heavenly endeavors) should be held loosely (i.e. as optional and able to removed from our lives). In other words, they should be things which will always take a back seat to the things that truly save since those things must be our priority. Otherwise, we will be guilty of the same thing as the Galatians: making optional (or even prohibited) things the essential/non-negotiable things. This was also no doubt a part of why Paul connects coveting to idolatry in (Col 3:5). By treating something that is optional/prohibited as non-negotiable, I am raising it to the level of God (or the commands of God) since these should be the only things necessary in this respect. It has in every sense of the word, become my “Lord” or “Master” and I its slave (Joh 8:34; 2Pe 2:19). This is why Paul says what he does in (Phi 3:1-19 and 1Co 9:24-27; also the author of Hebrews in Heb 12:1-2). Examples of things which are optional/prohibited but are treated as non-negotiable (i.e. as people’s Master and they its slave) = entertainment, pleasure, illegal drugs, money, approval, marriage, children, sports (Luk 14:25-33; 1Co 6:12).

16.5.3. By determining never to compromise.

(2-3) = Verse three is simply an expansion on what is said in verse two. Paul wants the Galatians to know that going down the road of the WOTL entails more than just circumcision. They will need to observe all of the OC clean laws (“He is obligated to keep the whole law”; Act 15:5). As such, Christ will truly be replaced and of “no advantage” to them - since through such full observance, they will also be performing their own blood sacrifices for sin. That being said, the thing not to miss in these verses is what Paul reveals as the voice of the precipitating action of circumcision. It is passive rather than active (περιτέμνησθε). In other words, rather than actively pursuing it, they were passively “accepting” it (**2- “If you accept circumcision...3 – “I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision”**). The verb can be rendered in the active voice (e.g. Luk 1:59), Paul however chooses instead the passive voice. What then has placed the Galatians on this enslaved and damning path? Not fervent conviction or religious passion to do the right thing, but something far less noble; something driven more by convenience, pressure, instability, insecurity, weakness and ultimately cowardliness. It was (instead) the passive decision of compromise⁵. As such, the thing also necessary to avoiding the pitfalls of spiritual slavery is a determination to never be guilty in this area; to never compromise. This (btw) is not only the path to freedom from such bondage, but also the key to possessing great confidence before we meet the Lord (1Jo 2:28; Heb 10:36-39). This is what Paul is getting at in (Act 20:20-27; 2Ti 4:7). Example of compromise (that inevitably enslaves and eventually kills you spiritually) = avoiding conflict/persecution related to sharing the gospel/contending for the Christian Faith (Mat 13:20-21).

¹ As discussed in the past, one of the biggest obstacles to converting Jews to Christianity was the removal of the OC clean laws as necessary to salvation/justification. This was the cause behind much of Paul’s persecution at the hands of the Jews. It was also what got Stephen stoned (Act 6:14, 13:38-39, 45, 21:27-28, 24:14-16, 25:8). Hence, a gospel that re-introduces such observance would naturally be far more palatable. Paul even implies success/popularity as the real motive behind its incorporation into the gospel (Gal 6:12).

² In vv 13-26 we will discuss in more detail what Paul means by “freedom” since this represents #17: GTGR requires a proper understanding of our freedom in Christ.

³ “The idea that...Judaism promoted the notion of salvation by works is a Christian misunderstanding. Salvation is not conceived as something earned, but something graciously granted to all who enjoy participation in the covenant.” (Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not A Christian*, p.94).

⁴ “In both the biblical period and later, salvation is primarily envisioned in communal rather individual terms. ..As E.P. Sanders argued thirty years ago, the vast majority of Jewish sources from the time of Paul understand that participation in the covenant is salvation.” (ibid, p.90-91).

⁵ This is always the case w/compromise. The term communicates a passive v. active decision. A decision in other words, made out of convenience and cowardliness rather than conviction.