

The Futility of Legalism *Galatians 4:21–5:1 (ESV)*

²¹ Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? ²² For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. ²³ But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. ²⁴ Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. ²⁵ Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. ²⁶ But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. ²⁷ For it is written, “Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.” ²⁸ Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹ But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. ³⁰ But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.” ³¹ So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. ¹ For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

SERMON OUTLINE

1. The Historical Setting
 - A. Two Sons
 - B. Two Mothers
 - C. Two Ways
2. The Spiritual Setting
 - A. Two Covenants
 - B. Two Jerusalem's
 - C. Two Destinies
3. The Application

Further Application:

Paul is now directly addressing “you who want to be under the law” (v 21). He is looking straight in the eyes of those Galatian Christians who have become convinced that they need to add their performance to Christ’s if they are to be acceptable to God. As we’ve seen before, Paul does not mean obeying the law here. To be “under the law” means relying on the law for your standing with God. And so this is a message that will particularly challenge religious people; as John Stott wrote: “*There are many such today. They are not Judaizers to whom Paul was writing, but people whose religion is legalistic, who imagine that the way to God is by observance of certain rules.*”

It is helpful to see that there are four kinds of people in the world:

1. Law-obeying, law-relying. These people are under the law, and are usually very smug, self-righteous and superior. Externally, they are very sure they are right with God, but deep down, they have a lot of insecurity, since no one can truly be assured that they are living up to the standard. This makes them touchy, sensitive to criticism and devastated when their prayers aren’t answered. This includes members of other religions, but here I am thinking mainly of people who go to church. These people have much in common with the Pharisees of Jesus’ day.

2. Law-disobeying, law-relying. These people have a religious conscience of strong works-righteousness, but they are not living consistently with it. As a result of this, they are more humble and more tolerant of others than the “Pharisees” above, but they are also much more guilt-ridden, subject to mood swings and sometimes very afraid of religious topics. Some of these people may go to church, but they stay on the periphery because of their low spiritual self-esteem.

3. Law-disobeying, not law-relying. These are the people who have thrown off the concept of the law of God. They are intellectually secular or relativistic, or have a very vague spirituality. They largely choose their own moral standards and then insist that they are meeting them. But Paul, in Romans 1:18-20, says that at a sub-conscious level, they know there is a God who they should be obeying. Such people are usually happier and more tolerant than either of the above groups. But usually there is a strong, liberal self-righteousness. They are earning their own salvation by feeling superior to others. It is just that this is usually a less obvious kind of self-righteousness.

4. Law-obeying, not law-relying. These are Christians who understand the gospel and are living out of the freedom of it. They obey the law of God out of grateful joy that comes from the knowledge of their sonship, and out of freedom from the fear and selfishness that false idols had generated. They are more tolerant than number 3, more sympathetic than number 1, and more confident than number 2. But most Christians struggle to live out number 4, and tend to see the world as a #1, #2, or even #3 person. But to the degree that they do, they are impoverished spiritually.