

What About the Galatians?

When we Christians are having conversations with other professing Christians about the gospel and essential knowledge, almost inevitably the question of the believers at Galatia arises. When we say that the gospel is the good news of salvation conditioned on the atoning blood and imputed righteousness of Christ alone and say that those who do not believe the gospel are going about to establish a righteousness of their own and are lost, the objection many times comes back, “Well, what about the Galatians? The false teachers deceived them into believing a false gospel. They were bewitched into believing that some of their salvation was conditioned on works. Yet Paul calls them his brothers in Christ.” I hope this small study will help my fellow Christians answer these objections according to God’s Testimony.

There is an important principle that needs to be clear before we get into a passage like this: Whenever we come to a passage that does not give all the details about what a person or persons believed or did not believe, we are to get an understanding of what they believed or did not believe from God’s Word ALONE. We are to compare Scripture with Scripture. Scripture clearly tells us what regenerate people believe and do not believe, and it clearly tells us what regenerate people confess and do not confess. False religionists will always want to fill in the blanks with their own vain imaginations. They will use passages like this to justify their blasphemy that saved people can believe or confess salvation conditioned on the sinner.

The false religionists love to run to passages such as this to prove their false doctrine. They love to run to the thief on the cross and say, “Well, what did the thief on the cross know? You can’t tell me that he knew about the doctrine of imputed righteousness.” They go on to say that the thief remained ignorant of the gospel after he was saved. But the Bible says differently. The Bible says that those who do not believe the gospel are lost (Mark 16:16). The Bible says that the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel (Rom. 1:17) and that those who are ignorant of this righteousness and are going about to establish a righteousness of their own and have not submitted to the righteousness of God are lost (Rom. 10:3). They have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge (Rom. 10:2). So we know that the thief on the cross believed the gospel in which the righteousness of God, the very imputed righteousness of Christ, is revealed.

Now we turn to the Galatians. What did the Galatian believers believe? In what way were they bewitched? Why was Paul so dogmatic in calling them to repentance?

The following are some of the main passages that manifest the issue:

“I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ” (1:6-7). “O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you? This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect in the flesh? Have ye suffered so many things in vain? if [it be] yet in vain” (3:1-4). “But now, after ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly

elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain” (4:9-11).

The Judaizers came into the Galatian church in the same way all false teachers come into true churches – they “*crept in unawares*” (Jude 4). They were “*transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ*” (2 Cor. 11:13), full of “*cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive*” (Eph. 4:14). They “*creep into houses*” (2 Tim. 3:6). The Judaizers were not coming right out and saying, “You need to go back under the bondage of the law. You are saved by your works.” This is not deceptive. The Judaizers were not Arminians who came in saying, “God loves everybody, Christ’s blood atoned for everybody, and now he is waiting for you to do your part to accept Christ as your personal Savior.” Christians are not deceived by this overt denial of the gospel. Instead, these Judaizers were very subtly and gradually bringing the ground of salvation (specifically, sanctification) into question. They were coming in disguised as preachers of the doctrines of grace. They were saying that the ground of salvation is the righteousness of Christ, but they were also subtly introducing the works of the law (as we will see below). These Judaizers were obviously lost, as Paul makes clear in 1:8-9.

We can ascertain what these Judaizers were teaching by reading what Paul rebukes the Galatian believers for doing: they were teaching that Christians must observe Old Testament laws such as circumcision and the observation of days, months, times, and years. Their reasoning was enough to bewitch the Galatian believers into observing these things. It was probably along the lines of, “God’s people throughout history have observed these things; even Christ observed them. Is it not then the Christian’s duty to observe these things? Is it not then an evidence of a mature Christian walk to be in conformity to God’s law? We Christians are law-keepers; we are not antinomians.” Those Galatian believers, ignorant of the Judaizers’ motives to bring them back under bondage to the law, and ignorant of what they themselves were moving toward, considered this reasonable. It was not until Paul showed them the dangerousness of their day-keeping and circumcising that they saw where this could lead.

Those of you who are in churches that bind the conscience by distinguishing Christmas from all other days on religious grounds and reckon the Christmas “holy day” as part of divine worship and look down upon or even discipline those who do not participate in your unbiblical worship, take note. Those of you who are involved in the gross and carnal superstition of sabbatism, take note. Who has bewitched you, that you should not obey the truth?

In observing these Old Testament laws, were the Galatian believers believing in or confessing a false gospel? Other parts of the book of Galatians, as well as many other Scripture passages, give us the answer. “*Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law*” (5:2-3). Is Paul saying here that all who are circumcised are lost? Obviously not. In the context of the entire book of Galatians, we see what he means: If one is circumcised or keeps days *thinking that it forms any part of the ground of his salvation (including sanctification)*, he is lost. If he thinks his law-keeping gains or maintains his salvation, he needs to be a perfect law-

keeper, because God demands perfect righteousness for salvation. Paul said earlier that “*as many as are of the works of the law are under a curse*” (3:10); that is, anyone who seeks to establish a righteousness of his own by his deeds is lost. Now what does this say about the Galatian believers? (We know they were believers; Paul calls them “brethren” nine times in this epistle.) From the above passages (5:2-3 & 3:10), we can be very sure, without any doubt, that the Galatian believers *were not* observing these Old Testament laws in order to gain or maintain salvation; they *did not* think that these observations formed *any part* of the ground of their salvation; for *if they did* observe the laws in this way, *they were under the curse, Christ would profit them nothing, and they were debtors to do the whole law*. Paul warned his brothers that by observing these things, they were in a dangerous position, because they were doing those things that the false religionists were telling them to do, and the false religionists were doing them thinking that they formed part of the ground of their salvation (especially sanctification). So Paul feared for them and strongly warned them to cease from observing these things. But he warned them as *brethren* – those who believed the gospel and were *not* going about to establish a righteousness of their own.

Other passages of Scripture clearly show that Christians *cannot* commit the sins of believing a false gospel or confessing a false gospel. As mentioned before, Mark 16:16 shows that those who do not believe the gospel are lost. John 10:5 shows that believers will not follow a false christ. Romans 10:3 shows that those who are not submitted to the righteousness of God [revealed in the gospel -- Romans 1:17] are lost. Romans 10:9 shows that those who confess the Lord Jesus [His person and His work] are saved. 1 John 2:22-23 and 4:15 and 5:1 show that those who deny Christ [His person and His work] are lost and those who believe that Jesus is the Christ are saved. 1 John 4:2-3 and 2 John 7 show that those who confess that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh [His person and His work] are saved and those who deny this are lost. 2 John 9 shows that those who do not abide in the doctrine of Christ [the gospel] are lost and those who do abide in this doctrine are saved. The list of Scriptures could go on and on. Since the Galatian believers were not lost, we know that they believed the true gospel, did not follow a false christ, were submitted to the righteousness of Christ, confessed the person and work of Christ, did not deny the person and work of Christ, and abode in the doctrine of Christ. They were in serious error and needed to be strongly rebuked, but they did *not* believe or confess the false gospel that the Judaizers believed and confessed.

[The same principle must be applied to Peter’s sin in 2:11-17. (This is another passage that people like to use to justify their position that believers can believe and profess a false gospel.) Peter had been eating with the Gentile believers, but when some of the Jewish believers came, he was afraid of what the Jewish believers might think, and he stopped eating with the Gentiles, sinfully implying that the Gentile believers were somehow less sanctified than the Jewish believers. Most pastors today would think that this was not such a big deal (“After all, he just switched tables”), but Paul rebuked Peter to his face because of this grievous sin, because Paul knew the implications of this and what other people would think (even Barnabas was carried away with this hypocrisy) and that Peter’s actions could even compel the Gentiles to live like the Jews. Yet Peter *was not* preaching a false gospel, or else he would be lost (1:8-9). And Paul

even said that he and Peter knew “*that a man is not justified by the works of the law*” (2:16). Thus, Peter, although by his fear-motivated actions he sinfully implied that the Jewish believers had “one up” on the Gentile believers, did not preach or believe the false gospel.]

Note that Jesus said that the false christ and false prophets would be so deceptive that “*if [it were] possible, they shall deceive the very elect*” (Matt. 24:24), “*to seduce, if [it were] possible, even the elect*” (Mark 13:22). This shows both the deceptiveness of the false teachers and the **UTTER IMPOSSIBILITY** of God’s people being deceived and seduced into believing a false gospel. Even though the Galatian believers were bewitched into observing the Old Testament Laws and were thus in serious sin that needed to be repented of, it was **NOT POSSIBLE** for the Galatian believers to be deceived and seduced to the point that they believed and thus confessed a false gospel.

Praise God for His loving protection of His children – who keeps us from falling (Jude 24)! Even though His children might be led into sin, He makes it **IMPOSSIBLE** for us to believe and confess the false gospel. May we be diligent to rebuke those brethren who are committing such grievous sins as the Galatian brethren were committing, and may we also be dogmatic in the truth that God’s people will always believe in salvation conditioned on the atoning blood and imputed righteousness of Christ alone and will *never* believe the false gospel of salvation conditioned on the sinner.

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