

“From Slaves to Son” (Part 2)

March 20, 2011

Text: Galatians 4:8-11

Last Sunday I mentioned that John Wesley acknowledged, he had served as a missionary to the American Indians in Georgia, before he was even truly born again.

Before that, while he & his brother Charles had been attending Oxford University, they had begun a club they called “The Holy Club.”

In 1729, Charles had decided to attend both Saturday/Sunday worship services and to attend communion services every week, hoping to become more holy/righteous by doing so.

He persuaded about 25 other Oxford students to do the same, in their own quests for true personal holiness.

They also fasted every Wednesday/Friday until 3:00 p.m.

They decided to carefully structure their daily activities so as to promote maximum righteousness in their own lives, and to waste as little time as possible in sleeping/eating.

They set aside time each day for prayer, Bible study, spiritual self-examination, and & a discussion of the Xn classics.

They scheduled regular visits to prisoners, & also time for taking food/clothing to poor families in the area.

They also scheduled times for teaching orphans to read.

Fellow students at Oxford mocked them, calling them “Methodists” for applying such a methodical structure to their Xn lives.

Ultimately, that name stuck, which is why the churches Wesley founded are called Methodist still today.

The irony of all this, as we saw last week, was that John Wesley later wrote in his journal that he wasn’t yet born again, in spite of all his good works & his seriousness about living the Xn life.

He was trying to faithfully obey Scriptures like Jms 1:27=>

*“This is pure & undefiled religion in the sight of our God & Father, to visit **orphans** and **widows** in their distress, & to keep oneself unstained by the world.”*

But he mistakenly thought that doing such good things improved his standing with God and guaranteed his salvation.

Wesley probably thought he was simply fulfilling the principle found in Eph 2:10=> *“We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for **good works**, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”*

But in the process, he was unwittingly overlooking & nullifying the principle found in the verses just before that—Eph 2:8-9=>
*“By **grace** you have been saved through **faith**; and that not of yourselves, it is the **gift** of God; / not as a result of works, that no one should boast.”*

This issue wasn't what they were doing;
It was their motivation for doing it.

Wesley was living under the Law, & his good works actually kept him from relying on God's grace alone, to save him.

It was all well-intentioned, but it backfired, being based on human effort rather than reliance on God's grace.

Man's pride is at the heart of all such mistaken but well-intentioned human efforts to improve his spiritual standing before God.

Whenever you do something that makes you feel guilty, what's your first instinctive response?

- * Is it to remind yourself that God graciously forgives your sin, has permanently adopted you as His child, & indwells you by His Spirit, because you are His child?
- * Or is it to do something yourself in order to fix the problem, and make things right with God?

It might be to=>

- * Apologize for what you did.
- * Resolve never/never to do it again—ever.
- * Beat up on yourself emotionally, hoping that God will accept your punishing yourself in lieu of His doing so.
- * Share the gospel with someone.

Our pride normally reacts by doing something good to offset the wrong, & to get ourselves back into God's good graces.

I.e., we react as Wesley did during that time about which he later wrote, “I had even then the faith of a servant, though not that of a son.”

It takes spiritual self-discipline to constantly remind ourselves that we are saved by God's grace alone, not our own efforts.

Our job is to humble ourselves before God and accept His grace—again/again/again/again/again.

As we saw last Sunday, living under the Law (as Wesley did) is like the life of a child who is an heir to a great fortune, but whose life is slave-like, because he's still a child, spiritually.

Living under God's Law is living a life of slavery.

Gal 4:3 says it's being "*held in bondage under the elemental things of the world*" (the proud human assumption we can best rely on our own obedience to moral law for our salvation, rather than our Heavenly Father's gracious forgiveness).

This proud assumption is the lowest common denominator of all manmade religion.

Seeking salvation by obedience to law might be understandable for someone who's never heard the gospel.

But it's inexcusable for someone who has heard/believed it (e.g. the Galatians).

Today's text is actually the 2nd half of last Sundays' text.

Last time Paul had contrasted the slave-like conditions of being a spiritual child, trying to obey the Law;

With the freedom of being redeemed from slavery to the Law, & the privileges of adoption by God as His son.

Now Paul will ask the Galatians why they, having been freed from pagan Law, again want to submit to the childlike slavery of bondage under Mosaic Law.

The Galatians' slavery to pagan law had been due to ignorance & unawareness before they'd heard the gospel;

But now they were enslaving themselves again, this time to Mosaic Law, despite the fact they had professed to believe in X.

While the 1st slavery to law was due to unawareness, the 2nd was due to inexcusable unfaithfulness.

Paul will then describe his own easiness about the negative implications of all this, regarding the Galatians' salvation.

So what we'll find in this text is=>

- 1) The Galatians' original unawareness
- 2) The Galatians' subsequent unfaithfulness
- 3) Paul's own uneasiness.

*** The Galatians' Original Unawareness**

Paul begins by reminding the Galatians of what their lives had been like before they learned about the true God=>

They had lived in ignorance/unawareness of His truth.

As pagans, they'd been subjected to pagan moral/religious laws.

Although these laws weren't exactly the same as Mosaic Law, they were a vague reflection of God's Law, nonetheless.

Romans 2:14-15 says=> "*When Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, / in that they show the work of the Law written*

in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.

The conscience of a Gentile pagan made him feel guilty over his inability to obey even his own pagan laws.

In addition, pagans (like all men) had a general knowledge of the true God.

They knew of His power/goodness, not only thru their conscience, but also thru the majesty of His creation.

But they'd suppressed this truth in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18) & exchanged the truth about God for a lie, worshiping the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25).

This too had added to their guilt.

Not having the revealed Word of God, the Galatian Gentiles had been ignorant of Him prior to their hearing the gospel, so they'd lacked the knowledge about X's death by which to become saved.

And in their ignorance/superstition, they were plagued with feelings of guilt, knowing nothing of God's grace.

[Galatians 4:8]=> *"However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods."*

Before the Galatian Gentiles believed in X, they worshiped pagan gods such as Zeus, Aphrodite & the other mythical gods of paganism, a/w/a idols manufactured by craftsmen.

In 1 Cor 10:20, Paul writes=> *"The things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons,"* so in worshiping such pagan gods, they were actually worshiping the demons that associated themselves with them.

These "gods" were really no gods at all, but they were able to keep the Galatians locked in spiritual darkness.

Before the Galatians had learned about X, the ignorance & superstition regarding these gods kept them enslaved.

The Galatians had also become enslaved to pagan laws of morality.

They had tried to submit to its ethical do's/don'ts.

In Col 2:20, Paul called these *"the elementary principles of the world,"* & he described some of them=>

*"If you have died with Christ to the **elementary principles of the world**, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, / 'Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!' / (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? / These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe*

treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence” (20-23).

The Galatians’ spiritual unawareness prior to their hearing the gospel was somewhat excusable; but their voluntary enslavement to the Law after being converted to X, was the result of unfaithfulness to Him.

Review

So far we’ve seen the Galatians’ unawareness before Christ entered their lives.

*** The Galatians’ Subsequent Unfaithfulness**

[Verse 9]=> *“But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?”*

The Galatians had come to know, and be known by, God.

It wasn’t simply that Paul had taught them doctrinal truths about God, but that they had come to know Him personally.

More accurately, God had come to know them, adopting them as His own sons, setting His love on them.

He must always initiate such a relationship, because we, being spiritually dead, have no power to do so.

“Knowing” and “being known” speaks of the closest possible kind of relationship between God/man.

It’s the kind of knowing, about which Jesus spoke in Jn 10:

*“I am the good shepherd; and I **know** My own, and My own **know** Me, / even as the Father **knows** Me and I **know** the Father” (Jn 10:14).*

The joy of God’s people is this privilege of knowing Him.

Jer 9:24 (God)=> *“Let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and **knows** Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness.”*

The essence of our sonship is knowing/being-known-by God, in the intimacy of communion with Him.

Jesus said (Jn 17:3)=> *“This is **eternal life**, that they may **know Thee**, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.”*

The worst thing that could happen to a person would be to go into eternity, not knowing the Lord, and hearing Jesus say at the

Judgment=> *“I never **knew** you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS” (Mt 7:23).*

Amazingly, having experienced the privilege of coming to know God through faith in Jesus X, the Galatians had then decided that wasn’t enough.

They wanted more, and were deceived by the Judaizers into thinking they could get more through obedience to the Law.

Paul says to them, in essence, “How could you even consider going back to obeying the Law, thinking that would somehow get you closer to God?”

“Granted, you’re trying to obey the Mosaic Law rather than your old pagan law, but the principle is still the same.

“You’ve placed greater trust in your own obedience, than you have in God’s grace, & that is wrong.”

The Law is weak/worthless because human flesh cannot obey it perfectly.

It has no power to save anyone from condemnation.

And it’s worthless, having no spiritual value—no life.

Martin Luther put it like this=> “The Law is weak and poor, the sinner is weak and poor: two feeble beggars trying to help each other. They cannot do it. They only wear each other out. But through Christ a weak and poor sinner is revived and enriched unto eternal life.”

Thinking one can prove himself by obedience to the Law, and thus become assured of his salvation, is what Paul calls a “*weak and worthless elemental thing.*”

Which means it belongs to the ABC’s of human religion—rudimentary/elementary religion.

It’s the proud/naive confidence that man can go it alone and save himself w/o God’s help.

It’s one of the basic principles to which the sinful pride of fallen man always falls prey, when he decides to become religious.

Worst of all, the Galatians were going back to a new form of the old spiritual slavery, under which they had once suffered like the child-heir who is always treated like a slave.

Before, they’d been enslaved by the deceptions of pagan priests, but now they were doing the job themselves, trading in their spiritual freedom for the bondage of Jewish legalism.

They were letting the Judaizers persuade them there was spiritual merit to be gained by strict obedience to the Law—“not handling, not tasting, not touching.”

The two characteristics which Mosaic Law & pagan law shared in common were=>

- * An inability to accomplish anything spiritually significant/beneficial.
- * An ability to make foolish people think it could, if they just tried hard enough to obey it.

Now Paul illustrates some of the Jewish practices which the Galatians had adopted in order to be like the Jews and secure their own salvation.

[Verse 10]=> *“You observe days and months and seasons and years.”*

This illustrates the *“weak/worthless elemental things”* of Judaism, into which the Galatians had fallen.

Paul is attacking the heresy that Xns can improve their standing with God by observing=>

* *“Days,”* by which he means the weekly Sabbaths.

* *“Months”*—the Jewish new moon festivals.

* *“Seasons”*—annual festivals such as Passover/Pentecost.

* *“Years”*—such as the Jewish year of Jubilee.

Paul is saying that celebrating these festivals is a meaningless exercise which has nothing to do with the Lord’s favor.

God originally established them for the Jews, but they as a nation had become like branches that have been temporarily broken off a tree & replaced by Gentile branches, which God has grafted in.

That is exactly the image by which Romans 11 describes the relationship of Jews/Gentiles in God’s redemptive plan.

Until the Jews repent of their rebellion against God, there’s no point to their continuing these feasts/festivals.

And there’s absolutely no point at all for Gentiles to do so under any circumstances.

Col 2:16=> *“Let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—/ things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.*

Christ has already come, & the Jews have rejected Him, so their celebration of His coming is a meaningless farce.

The religion of the Jews, a/w/a that of the Galatian Gentiles who were emulating them, had deteriorated into external ritualism & an oppressive routine of rules/regulations.

This raises a question about Xns observing the Sabbath=>

Should we do so? No, because the Church has replaced Saturday worship w/ the Lord’s Day worship on Sunday, the day X rose from the dead.

We’re free to worship on Saturday if we choose to, but not in the Jewish sense of fulfilling the Law.

We could, if we chose, even worship on Tuesday, or any other day of the week.

Rom 14:5=> *“One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind.”*

A 2nd question=> Should we break the routine of weekly worship altogether, just to keep from becoming legalistic about it as the Jews did?

No (emphatically No)!

Weekly worship wasn't just a Jewish custom, but goes back to God's creation, in which He rested on the 7th day, after creating the world in the first 6 days.

He didn't rest on the 7th day because He was tired.

Omnipotence doesn't get tired.

He rested to satisfy Himself with/in all the good things He had created.

Gen 2:3=> "*God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.*"

God "*sanctified*" the 7th day, separating it from the rest, and claiming it for His own.

"*Rested*" means that God surveyed His work and found delight in it all, because it revealed His glory.

Psa 19:1=> "*The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.*"

Man needs 1 full day a week to do what God did on the 7th day=>

Reflect on His glory, delight himself in the Lord, and find satisfaction for his soul in doing so.

He needs 1 day to opt out of the world, & worship his God.

In our text, Paul has, in essence, said this to the Galatians=>

"Despite the fact that God has saved/adopted you and granted you the indwelling of His Spirit, you have subjected yourselves once again to the bondage of weak/worthless law.

"This would have been excusable if you were still ignorant pagans, but how on earth could you have done it with the knowledge of truth that I have given you?"

Now Paul gets down to what's really bothering him=>

*** Paul's Own Uneasiness**

[Verse 11]=> "*I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.*"

Paul's actual wording=> "*I fear you*" (not "I fear for you").

Paul feared the Galatians because they had the power to really disappoint him, & they might well use it.

Whenever we choose to love someone, we give him/her the power to disappoint/hurt us.

Every true Xn teacher is vulnerable to such disappointment.

* Judas disappointed Jesus, as did Peter, when he denied even knowing his Lord.

* Philip disappointed Jesus too, by asking Him on the last night of X's life, to show him the Father.

You can hear the disappointment in Jesus' words=>

“Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how do you say, ‘Show us the Father’?” (Jn 14:9).

* Samuel was disappointed by Saul, David by Ahithophel.

* And Paul was disappointed by the unfaithful Xns of Galatia.

True teachers teach in the hope that their teaching of the truth will draw others close to God, so that He will be glorified, and their lives (both in time/eternity) will be blessed.

When that doesn't happen (for whatever reason) a real Xn teacher inevitably feels truly disappointed.

Paul feared that His ministry-labors among the Galatians had been in vain.

E.g. that his having been stoned/left for dead at Lystra (part of Galatia) had accomplished nothing.

To put it another way, he feared that they had never become truly converted, and therefore weren't really born again Xns after all.

Otherwise, how could they have forgotten their former slavery to pagan law, & surrendered their freedom in X, a/w/a the H.S.'s indwelling, to a new form of slavery—that of Mosaic Law?

I Cor 1:30 says X has become for believers, righteousness & sanctification & justification, so if the Galatians hadn't found all that in X, they prob. weren't Xns.

There is an enormous tug on the human heart to trust self, rather than the grace of God, for one's salvation.

Even we as believers have to constantly fight the tendency to revert back to this elemental/worldly trait of our flesh.

The Pharisees were 1 of the best illustrations of this proud bent of human nature.

They had seen Gk culture intruding on the beliefs/lifestyle of the Jews, & they determined to put a stop to it.

They did what John Wesley & the Holy Club would do 18 centuries later: sought holiness thru human effort.

The Pharisees believed God had sent Israel into Babylonian Exile, because of His displeasure with their disobedience to Mosaic Law.

So they added to the Law, surrounding it with a whole collection of rabbinical sayings, hoping to raise up a hedge around the Law, to keep the Jews from ever getting even close to disobeying/violating it.

These Pharisees were well-intentioned businessmen, who simply hoped that by encouraging Israel to obey the Law, they could help protect her from another such exile.

Unfortunately, they failed, because the “hedge” they built had only to do with outward behavior, not the heart.

When Jesus came, He told the Jews (Mt 5:20)=> *“I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

I.e., salvation involves righteousness of the heart, and not just that of outward obedience.

And righteousness like that comes only from God, as He redeems a person by His grace, regenerates him by His Spirit, adopts him as His own son, then begins sanctifying his heart/life.

Trying to make yourself righteous by your own feeble efforts will only turn you into a slave-like child spiritually.

By contrast, God’s amazing grace transforms the heart, as a person believes in Jesus.

W/ that understanding, John Newton wrote his timeless hymn *“Amazing Grace.”*

Newton’s mother had died when he was 7, and he went to sea at the age of 11, getting involved in the horrible slave trade.

As a sailor, he lived an extremely vile/wicked life.

When he was 23, his ship almost sank during a storm, & he became so frightened that he cried out to God for mercy.

Jesus X wonderfully/graciously redeemed/transformed him.

Afterward, he never wanted to forget what he had once been, and what God had done for him out of His grace/mercy.

So Newton fastened a plaque to his fireplace mantel which contained the words of Deut 15:15=> *“And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the LORD thy God redeemed thee.”*

John Newton had no doubt that God had saved a wretch like him by His grace, not because he had ever earned it with good works.

And so he wrote=> *“Amazing grace! How sweet the sound—
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.”*