

STUDIES IN GALATIANS No. 21

Galatians 5:7-12

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Text Comment

- v.7 When Paul had last heard of the Galatian Christians or when he had last seen them they were going on with Christ and the gospel. It is the more astonishing that they should so soon and apparently so easily been side-tracked.

"obey the truth" We've already noticed that the NT is not hesitant to think of faith as an act of obedience. What makes faith an instrument of salvation by grace alone is not that there is no obedience in it, but, first, because the nature of faith is to look away from itself to another -- which makes it the appropriate instrument of salvation by grace -- and, second, because it is itself God's gift to those who are being saved (Ephesians 2:8-9) so cannot in any way be regarded as the believer's own contribution to his salvation. In any case, the gospel doesn't come simply as an invitation. It comes as a command, a summons. As Rabbi Duncan once wrote: "The Gospel does not say, 'There is a Saviour, if you wish to be saved;' but, 'Sir, you have no right to go to hell -- you can't go there without trampling on the Son of God.'" [Cited in Murray, *Spurgeon vs. Hyper-calvinism*, 97]

- v.9 This is a proverbial saying. Paul also uses it in 1 Corinthians 5:6 where he introduces it to awaken the Corinthians to the alarming possibilities of their tolerating sexual sin in their midst. Here he is thinking of the corrupting effect of legalism. Let the principle of works for justification penetrate at all and soon it will crowd grace out altogether. History has proved this times without number.

- v.10 You will have noticed as we have worked our way through Galatians that Paul has alternated between hopefulness and near despair concerning his Galatian converts. As recently as 4:11 he said he feared for them, that somehow he had wasted his efforts on them. In 4:20 he confesses that he is perplexed about them. But here he expresses his hopefulness. They are Christians and, being Christians, they will see the error of this teaching that has recently seduced them and give it up and send the judaizers packing. And it will be the Lord who will see to it. The Lord knows who are his and he knows how to rescue the godly from temptation.

"The one throwing you into confusion" is singular. It is probably a generic singular here. Everyone or anyone who... Perhaps the judaizers did have a leader, even an outstanding personality. It is often the case. But Paul simply alternates between the plural and the singular, as for example in 1:7 and 1:9.

"whoever he may be" Paul may not know who the judaizers were; he may have suspected

but not been sure; or, he may have known exactly who they were, but preferred not to mention names.

v.11 As we have said before, one of the charges that was leveled against Paul, apparently, as a way of undermining his reputation and so his authority among these Galatian Christians was that he was inconsistent. Preaching against circumcision to some and on some occasions, but supporting it to others and at other times. It is not hard to see how such a charge might arise. After all, we know that Paul had nothing against circumcision **per se**. He had no objection to Jews continuing to practice the rite, and, apparently later, after Galatians, he was still willing to have Timothy circumcised, Timothy being half Jew. Much later, when Paul returned to Jerusalem after the third missionary journey, he was told that there was a rumor circulating that Paul forbade Jews of the dispersion to practice circumcision, but, interestingly, James the Just (James the brother of the Lord; the apostle James of Peter, James, and John, was martyred long before, you remember; Acts 12) and his fellow-elders, the leaders of the Jerusalem church that is, were sure the rumor was false.

But, if one was looking for a way of attacking Paul, this might seem like a giant inconsistency. Either circumcision is right or wrong, you can't have it both ways, they would say.

Paul's reply is that if, in fact, he is advocating the very thing that the judaizers are advocating, why should they persecute him; they should welcome him and his message with open arms. He would be their ally, not their enemy. There is an irony here, because in 6:12 Paul will claim that the reason the judaizers make so much of circumcision, etc. is precisely to avoid persecution by the Jewish brethren they left behind when they joined the Christian church. If they keep the church looking Jewish, if there doesn't seem to be all that much of a separation between Christianity and Judaism, then the Jews won't be as agitated against them.

"The offense of the cross will be removed." The whole argument was whether salvation was by Christ or by works; whether the entire explanation of a sinner's peace with God and entrance into eternal life was the death of the Savior on the cross, or the religious and moral acts of the person himself (no matter if joined to the work of Christ). The argument is over **the sufficiency of the atonement of Jesus Christ**. (That is what the argument is about between Protestants and Roman Catholics.)

Add works as these judaizers were doing and the offense of the cross was removed. The man still held his destiny in his own hand; religious works were still critical to one's justification. Paul will say elsewhere that the entire idea of salvation through the death of a man on a cross was blasphemy to the Jews (they had completely lost the OT doctrine of a Redeemer who would die for the sins of the world) and it was foolishness to Gentiles. In either case, any doctrine that diminished the cross in the scheme of salvation and laid emphasis instead on human works removed that offense, or at least, lessened it.

In sum, the fact that the judaizers were still out to get Paul was proof enough that the charge that he preached circumcision in anything like the way they preached it was false.

- v.12** This final salvo is effectively a curse, a wish that these disturbers of the church, who think so much of circumcision, would go ahead and castrate themselves, become eunuchs. Perhaps Paul is thinking of Deuteronomy 23:1 which forbids a castrated person from entering the assembly of the Lord; or, perhaps he simply doesn't want them to reproduce; or, perhaps he is thinking that, if on their thinking "cutting" is so great, let them cut some more and make still clearer to the Galatians that a mere physical rite is what is important to these people, not true and living faith in Christ and God.

This evening I'm going to direct our attention to Paul's imprecation, a fancy name for curse, in v. 12. The rest is largely repetitive of points made now several times already in the letter to this point. I use the fancy word "imprecation" because when we think of this kind of language and sentiment as it appears in the Bible, we usually think of what are called the "imprecatory psalms." You know such psalms, where the author says violent things against his enemies or wishes violence from God against them: "break their teeth in their mouths, O God" [Psalm 58:6]; "...happy is he...who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks" [Psalm 137:8-9].

Paul's remark is more like the last one in which he is not actually specifically asking God to do something to these false teachers (though he has threatened their punishment in v. 10), but is hoping that something bad will happen to them, or, better, that they themselves will do something bad to themselves. In any case, it is hard to avoid the conclusion of one commentator whose comment on v. 12 begins: "And now Paul concludes with a very bitter word" [sehr bitteren Worte]. [H.W. Beyer, *Das Neue Testament Deutsch*, vol. 8, p 32]

What are we to do with expressions like this? What of "love your enemies" and "return blessing for cursing" and "do not repay anyone evil for evil...overcome evil with good." Some Christians comfort themselves with the thought that all of this harsh language of curse and desire for vengeance comes in the OT and that now, in the NT we know better. But it is not so. We have a statement like this and a number of others like it. What is worse, in Revelation 6:10 we have the souls of the martyrs, now in heaven, crying out for vengeance on their enemies! And in Revelation 18:20 and 19:1-6 you have the saints in heaven **rejoicing** that God has executed his vengeance on their enemies! Clearly if you have such statements made by those already in heaven, we have got somehow to accommodate such expressions to the rest of the teaching of the Bible. There must be a proper place for such expressions as Paul utters here.

[I should say as an aside, that the NT statements are generally not quite so fierce as we find in the OT, though Paul's words here come close. But that is due to the Hebrew, the Semitic penchant for extravagant speech. We need to be careful not to treat those expressions without allowing for and adjusting for the Semitic penchant for hyperbole. Take, for example, Jeremiah 20:14-18, where Jeremiah, in a time of deep discouragement, mourns the day he was born and wishes he had never been born. But, in the midst of that doleful expression of his misery, he says this:

"Cursed be the man who brought my father the news, who made him very glad, saying, 'A child is born to you -- a son!' May that man be like the towns the Lord overthrew without pity. May he hear wailing in the morning, a battle cry at noon. For he did not kill me in the womb, with my mother as my grave..."

Now, it would be a huge mistake to take that sentiment literally and to suppose that Jeremiah really wanted the poor, innocent fellow who announced his birth to suffer for it for the rest of his life. This kind of language is figurative, a way of expressing the strength of one's bitterness and sorrow.]

But, be that as it may, we still have these remarkably bitter and severe expressions in the Bible, seeking judgment and the Lord's curse on the enemies of the particular biblical writer, Paul in this case, Jeremiah and David in others.

What are we to think of this?

Well, first and obviously, such expressions are a potent demonstration of how seriously the biblical author and Paul here took the issue that he was addressing.

An argument that is conducted in a completely genteel manner leaves one invariably with the impression that there isn't that much at stake. Paul's fury at the spiritual harm done to his converts shows up nowhere in Galatians so white hot as here where he gets most personal concerning the false teachers. It is hard to be genteel, it isn't conceivably right to be genteel and altogether calm in a debate that has eternal life or eternal doom as the potential outcome. These men, after all, are not simply misguided, they are evil and what they are doing is evil. And the measure of that evil is not that Paul doesn't like them personally, but that they are betraying the gospel that was revealed to men through Jesus Christ and his apostles. They may, in fact, have been very impressive men. Some of them may have been very gracious and kindly and soft-spoken men. But they were evil nonetheless. They may have been entirely sincere, so far as they judged their own motives -- though Paul has no doubt that, at bottom, like all sinners, their motives are selfish and corrupt (he has said so already in 4:17). But sincerity as judged by human beings is a measure of nothing. Pascal says somewhere that most of the real evil in the world is done by people who are perfectly sincere so far as sincerity can be measured by us. They believe in what they are doing; they believe it is right; they believe it is good for others. But they are wrong, and their wrong is so foul and so destructive that they are evil for advocating it.

Very often, when we hear someone criticizing the strong words that are being spoken to and about some theological error and urging moderation and love, what we are really hearing is an indifference to the truth and genuine unbelief in the seriousness of the question. What we hear here from Paul is the reverse: what is at stake is heaven and hell, and someone who would take a Christian and try to send him to hell is a genuinely evil person, however nice he may seem.

Second, there is a distinction that must be observed in the judgment of others if one is to be true to all that we find in the Bible. There is a kind of judging we are not to do (Matthew 7:1) and a kind of judging we are absolutely required to do. And the imprecatory statements of the Bible, as here in

Galatians 5:12, belong to that latter class of judging.

Listen to this scholar's explanation of the difference.

"[There is in the Bible a distinction] between the odium abominationis and the odium inimicitiae. The former is the hatred of objective moral censure while the latter is the hatred of merely personal malice. The imprecations in the Psalter, by any fairminded reading, are to be construed as wholly consumed with the cause of righteousness, not at all with the pettiness of self. As a result, they are not psychologically incompatible with the law of love. The mean-spirited odium inimicitiae is a sinful hatred, embittered toward a person, whether good or evil, with personal spite. The mentality of odium abominationis, however, is more complex. This hatred abominates a person only because he embodies evil. Were repentance to be demonstrated, this hatred would dissolve into affection. It is always ready to love, if that which requires condemnation is removed from the equation. This conditional assessment of others is, indeed, the very way we judge ourselves in the private counsels of our own consciences. This is not to say that we are split personalities in a neurotic sense, but only that the complexity of moral assessment underlying the biblical imprecations is a daily commonplace rather than a theologically scandalous 'problem' in Scripture. In reference to the dominical promise of eternal condemnation (Matthew 25:41) the imprecations of the Psalms are 'pale but meaningful adumbrations of the final confrontation between evil...and God...and [God's] determination to create a new universe 'where righteousness dwells.'" [John McKenzie, cited in Ray Ortlund Jr., JETS 42,2 (June 1999) 327]

In other words, there is nothing unChristian in a statement such as "do not I hate those that hate thee" because the hatred is directed to a person only insofar as, to the extent that, and so long as the person remains an enemy of God and so an enemy of man as well. It can express that hatred while praying for the man's repentance and standing ready all the while to rejoice in his repentance and salvation.

Third, I have told you before, that there is a realism in the Bible that we often try to avoid facing.

The fact is, you and I cannot pray for the Lord to return, we cannot say "Marantha" without praying that the Lord pay back trouble for those who have troubled us, that he punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of Christ, that they be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power. For all of that is what the Scripture tells us will transpire when Jesus comes again. [2 Thessalonians 1:6-9] It is simply sentimental to think about the return of Christ without facing the implications of that return for the unbelieving world. The victory of God cannot be had without the crushing of evil. To imagine otherwise is an absurdly superficial sentimentality. Paul was not given to sentimentality!

John Stott puts it this way:

"I do not find it hard to imagine situations in which holy men of God do and should both cry to God for vengeance and assert their own righteousness. Since God is going to judge the

impenitent, a truly godly person will desire him to do so, and that without any feelings of personal animosity." [Cited in NBC, 451]

Fourth, it is very important to remember that Paul is talking about people whom he does not regard as Christians. He has already said they bring a different gospel that is no gospel at all. He has, at the end of chapter 4, called them the sons of the slave woman and not the sons of the promise.

It is a very different matter to speak harshly about people we are obliged to regard as fellow Christians. We may speak quite sternly about their errors, as the apostles do, but there is a clear distinction in tone and the severity of judgment from Paul's remarks to the church in Corinth, for example, to his remark about the judaizers here in 5:12. There is a difference between warning someone as a brother (2 Thessalonians 3:15) and cursing the enemies of God.

Once again we are left with a tension very difficult to maintain in practice. But, then, who said the Christian life was easy. We must be furiously loyal to the truth and refuse to pull our punches with the enemies of the gospel and the church of God. But we must also turn the other cheek, love our enemies, bless those who curse us, and refuse to take revenge. Knowing how to do both and when to do each is the problem, is it not? But, usually, we know, if we are honest, when our anger is righteous and does not have self in it and when, to be honest, our criticism of others is personal and spiteful (a defense of ourselves) and not motivated by a true love of God and Christ and of our fellow man. There is nothing more clarifying than just to face the truth we already know about ourselves.

Alexander Whyte used to say that if you couldn't handle controversy with a clean, all-man-loving heart, you should leave the work to better men than yourself. And John Newton warns us all that there is a principle of self that disposes us to despise those who differ from us. Therefore we have to be very careful of our motives when we take in hand to judge others.

You remember Bengel's famous four word comment on Matthew 7:1: "judge not lest ye be judged." *Sine scientia, necessitate, amore.* The judging that is forbidden is that judging of others, that condemning of others that is without knowledge of the facts, that is not necessary, and that is without love. Judge only when you do it with knowledge and love (for God and man) and only when you are compelled to do it by your loyalty to God and man.

Here is John Stott once more.

"I myself would find it hard to echo these sentiments. The reason for this is not, however, that they are beneath me, but that they are beyond me.... I cannot attain to desires for divine judgment without vindictiveness nor to assertions of my own righteousness without pride." [NBC, 451]

And, finally, Calvin. "The Lord does not need my defense of his name and truth. But even a dog barks when his master is attacked!"