

Introduction

My daughter wrangled me into a new role this winter. She signed up to be the coach of a 4-6 grade girls' basketball team. But here was the thing. She needed an assistant coach. Having an assistant coach was going to be especially important for her because she would have to miss a couple games due to her work schedule. So she asked me. Well, how do you say no to your daughter? Actually the idea appealed to me. So I said, "sure."

A couple Saturdays ago we had our first game and Ariail was scheduled to work that Saturday, so it was just me and the team. It turned out to be a lot of fun! We won, 28-8!! I told the girls they made me look really good in my first game as a basketball coach. Anyway it has been fun to participate and observe Ariail as she coaches these girls. One of the first lessons she tried to teach the girls was how important it is not to lose possession of the ball. She said to the girls, "you see this ball? On the court this ball is like gold, you don't want to let anyone take it away from you." She went on to show them dribbling techniques to protect the ball.

Well this morning, as we turn to Galatians, we see Paul asserting something very similar to his readers, only it is far more important than a basketball or even gold. He is stressing how precious is the gift of freedom which Christ Jesus gave his life to provide for us. It is imperative not to let anyone or anything take it away from us. We must stand firm in that freedom and not give it up for a yoke of slavery.

[Read text and Pray]

Freedom is a precious gift. Yet it is always under attack. There is always something or someone attempting to reach in and take it away. Countless enemies stand ready to rob us and take our freedom away. We see it in our own nation as freedoms have been eroding away through the years and we stand at the brink of the possibility of a colossal loss of more freedoms because of those who seemingly are only too happy to bow to the slavery of tyranny. The same is true of our spiritual freedom in Christ. If we do not stand firm in it, we will lose it.

This tragedy was about to take place in Galatia if people didn't listen up and take action. The folks in Galatia who had embraced Christ were on the verge of exchanging their freedom in Christ for slavery to the law. Paul's effort to keep them from giving it up and giving Christ up with it reaches another level in our text. He draws on the Old Testament to provide a graphic illustration which fuels his plea that they appreciate the precious gift of freedom and that they stand firm in it.

So I want you to see the importance of paying careful attention to the word as well as the stark contrast it reveals between being under the law and being in Christ and the vigilance that is required for us to remain in the freedom Christ died to provide. We will set these matters forth under three headings. It is as though Paul was saying to the Galatians and through them to us: be alert; be discerning; and be vigilant.

I. Be Alert.

This is where we start. It is where Paul begins in this text. "Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?" Paul is a clever writer here. He uses the word law for different things but it helps to emphasize the point. The mosaic law was commonly called "the law." But so

was the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible in particular or perhaps even the whole of the Old Testament. So the law to which the Judaizers were bowing is found within the law meaning the scripture. These false teachers and their would-be converts were so intent on following the law of Moses that they ignored or overlooked what the law (God’s word) had to say.

By this statement Paul reveals to us clearly that the problem in Galatia was not related only to circumcision. The false teachers, the Judaizers, were not merely advocating circumcision but submission to the law of Moses as a whole. They were even observing days and months and seasons. So this was not a matter of a single aspect of the law but of the mosaic law as a whole, and that helps us understand the context into which Paul is speaking.

But Paul’s point is that one finds the law of Moses within the portion of scripture called the law. And if one is going to give oneself to the law of Moses, one ought to be familiar with the whole law (or the whole word) of God. The whole word of God plays an indispensable role in how one understands and applies the parts. There is a charge here that the Judaizers may be well familiar with the mosaic law itself, but they are not sufficiently familiar with the word of God as a whole and hence they misunderstand and misapply the part that they know.

Jesus made the same point to the Pharisees in his day. When they approached him about his disciples plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath, he said to them, “HAVE YOU NOT READ what David did when he was hungry?” When the Pharisees put Jesus to the test about divorce and remarriage, Jesus asked them, “HAVE YOU NOT READ that he who created them from the beginning?” The Pharisees and scribes proudly thought themselves experts in the law, but Jesus showed them that whatever knowledge they did have, they did not have a handle upon the whole; they missed some very significant things that would have answered their questions and cleared up their understanding.

It is an important reminder to you and me about our knowledge and understanding of the Bible as a whole. Having the word in your possession is different from having the word properly in your comprehension! Study to show yourself approved rightly dividing the word of truth. Every Christian bears responsibility to know the word and grasp the word as God gave it.

Sometimes we lose sight of how many variations and viewpoints there are out there of what it is the scripture says. But when we encounter some of those viewpoints, we are reminded that not everyone is correct. Not everyone CAN BE correct. And not all viewpoints are equally valid. In the morning Bible study group, Joel has been helping us understand one of those deviant teachings in our day. It is commonly called the “New Perspective on Paul.” What we see is that when we put the theology of that viewpoint under the microscope of scripture, it will not stand. But we have to be able to put all viewpoints to the test of the scripture—our own included. You who have the Bible, do you listen to the Bible? Do you know your Bible? Do you study your Bible? Do you examine your beliefs about what it says carefully and within the context of the whole of scripture?

I am reminded of that word from James that I read a fresh this week: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” Teachers bear significant responsibility before God to impart the truth. But each of us will stand before God to give account for how we have handled his word. We must know it rightly. And to know it rightly we must NOT sweep portions of it away or ignore them. We must put the whole together in accord with all of it. Brothers and sisters, too much is riding on an accurate understanding of God’s word for us to fail to take all of it seriously. So, let us be alert!

Let us also ...

II. Be Discerning

After drawing attention to the importance of understanding the whole word, Paul takes a deep dive into the Genesis account of Abraham's offspring. Abraham had two sons—Ishmael and Isaac. These two sons are expressive of two kinds of people who might claim descendancy from Abraham then and even in the present day. And Paul highlights a number of aspects of the sons which distinguish each one from the other.

They are distinguished first as to their mothers. Ishmael was born of Hagar, the slave woman. Paul characterizes the nature of his birth. He was "born according to the flesh." It is a reference to the fact that Ishmael's conception and birth were NOT according to the purpose and plan and promise of God. As Abraham and Sarah aged and the possibility of their conceiving a child seemed more and more impossible, they determined to help God along by using Sarah's maid in her place. In effect they were attempting to fulfill God's covenant promises by their own works. This was sinful human effort because they thought they could accomplish God's promise through their own work. Paul's intent clearly is for the Galatians to see that human efforts do not bring about the promise of right standing he has made. It is not for those who trust in their works but for those who trust in him.

See, in contrast, Isaac was born through the promise. God had promised that Abraham and Sarah would bear a son. And in a stunning and miraculous work of God's grace, he enabled two people in the context of their marriage, two people who were as good as dead, to conceive and deliver a son. It was God's work that alone could fulfill his promise. Again, Paul's intent seems clear. The mosaic law is not meant to be a guide for humans to think that by keeping it they will have right standing with God. The law is good but its purpose is for humans to despair of themselves and their efforts and trust wholly in God for right standing.

So these two sons are distinguished from each other by the covenants their mothers represent. Through Hagar, Ishmael corresponds to Mt Sinai and then to earthly Jerusalem. Ishmael represents the descendants of Abraham who depend on fulfilling the mosaic law for their right standing with God.

Paul has clearly asserted that the mosaic law is incapable of reconciling sinners with God. The mosaic law, though good, is weakened by human sin and therefore, to be under that law corresponds to slavery. It demands more than can be supplied. It demands perfect and complete compliance and therefore does not liberate people from sin. What links Hagar to Sinai is the fact of slavery. Under the Sinai law Israel's life was marked by slavery to sin. So Hagar represents Sinai but also corresponds to earthly Jerusalem. Earthly Jerusalem stands for the people who are attempting to lay hold of God's promises through their own efforts. They include the Judaizers. And just as Hagar was a slave and bore a son for slavery, so are all who depend upon works of the law.

Through Sarah, the free woman, Isaac corresponds to the Jerusalem above—that is the city of God in heaven. Hebrews 12 directs our attention to the heavenly Jerusalem. There we read, "For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest 19 and the sound of a trumpet[—Mt Sinai—] 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."

Sarah was of course long barren. But she gave birth through the promise and work of God to a son whose descendants would be innumerable. There was also seemingly such a time in Israel's history when they were in exile. Paul quotes a passage from the prophet Isaiah in which he was encouraging hope for the future. Things seemed hopeless; Israel was like a barren woman. But God would have mercy and according to his promise—and hence by His work—he would miraculously bring restoration as though from nowhere through his promise. That's the way it was with Isaac, and that is the way Isaiah saw it to be in the future. And this is how Paul sees the conversion of the Gentiles. The ultimate fulfillment of the promise made while Israel was in exile has come to pass in the conversion of children of the barren woman. Gentiles have been born into God's family through his grace and through his work and in accord with his promise.

It is as Tom Schreiner puts it, "The law did not produce God's children, for those under the law were enslaved by sin. The law puts to death, but the gospel proclaimed by Paul brings freedom. Further, the gospel produces true children for the Lord—children of the promise like Isaac. Therefore the Gentiles of Galatia should exult with joy because they are the fulfillment of the promise; they are the true children of God." (304) Unlike the child of Hagar, the child of slavery, the children of the promise—born from above through God's supernatural work—are free.

Verse 29 now points us to a relational distinction between the two sons and who they represent. We read, "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." Paul is explaining the background to the persecution that was then faced by the children of promise. It is striking that when Isaac was born, Ishmael scoffed at him (Genesis 21:9). Nothing has changed. Those who strive according to the law are in opposition to the children that are free. Those who are on the outside looking in, who are of the flesh, are in conflict from their own hearts with the children who are born of the Spirit. Christians should not be surprised by the conflict they face with those whose religion is one of works. There will be constant attempts to draw the free back into slavery through whatever means can be devised.

But persecution notwithstanding, Paul points to two additional distinctions between the two sons and those who stand in their likeness. He asks, "What does the scripture say?" He then quotes the verse from Genesis that follows the report of Ishmael's ridicule. The scripture says, "Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman will not inherit with the son of the free woman." The two sons differ as to location and inheritance. As to location, the slave son is cast out while the other is kept. As to inheritance, the slave son does not inherit, but the son of the free woman does. The sons of the flesh, those who strive for acceptance on the basis of the works of the law, will ultimately be cast out. They will be left out of an eternity with God. They will miss out on the inheritance God has for his people. On the contrary, it is the children of the promise, those who are of the faith of Abraham, those who are born from above, who will be kept and who will receive the inheritance. And Paul says to the Galatians, "That is who we are."

That begs the question this morning: who are you? Are you a child of the flesh? Are you depending on your attempts to do this and do that to be right with God? Is your concern with what you do for God? Or is your hope in what Christ has done for you? Are you born of the Spirit? Born from above? By nature we are all under the yoke of slavery and every religion out there is a system based on human achievement. The gospel stands alone as offering salvation as a free gift only to those who will believe, who will trust in the Jesus who kept the law completely and fulfilled every demand of God for righteousness and died according to the law so that he might set us free from its slavery. Are you trusting in Christ alone? The answer to that question is what will reveal what kind of son you are.

If you are a slave, then the future is dim. You will be cast out and you will not share in the inheritance. But if you are free, then you will be kept and you will enter into and enjoy the riches of God's inheritance for all eternity. The choice should be easy. Shouldn't it? But think of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus one day. He asked, "What good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?" He wanted to do stuff to earn it, but he didn't want to let go and follow Jesus in faith. J. V. Fesko rightly states, "the sinful person cannot DO anything [to inherit eternal life]. Rather, the sinful person must look by faith to what another has done on his behalf."

So let us be alert, and let us be discerning, and finally let us ...

III. Be Vigilant

In one short but wonderful statement, Paul summarizes the purpose of Christ's work for the children of promise. "For freedom Christ has set us free." He set us free from the penalty of the law. He set us free from the curse of the mosaic law. And he set us free from trying to adhere to the mosaic law. And he set us free in order that we might enjoy the freedom corresponding to the gospel.

Does this mean we are free to sin? One of the problems many have with a salvation that is by grace through faith is that it seems to them that the works of a person are rendered irrelevant and they can go live any way they please. There is seemingly no incentive for pursuing righteousness. They misunderstand this freedom and the work of God in the children of promise.

You see the work of God in the children of promise sets them free to obey God. It transforms them into people who love God and his ways. Hence it is that Paul asks in Romans 6, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" Our freedom is from the law but also from the power of sin. We are not free to sin. But we are free from a performance mindset. We are free from the mosaic law. If we go back to the law, we forfeit freedom for slavery and join up with Ishmael rather than Isaac.

So we must be vigilant. We must stand firm and refuse to be subject again to a yoke of slavery. We must watch out for every form of a works mindset. It is like a yoke that enslaves and by which we forfeit the Jerusalem from above and the eternal inheritance of God.

Conclusion

The objective in basketball is to get the ball and keep the ball until you get it through the basket. And then you want to get it back from the other team so that you can score again. The other team stands in the way. They want to do the same as you—get the ball from you and keep it for themselves. A vigilant team protects the ball. And a vigilant follower of Christ protects from all assault the freedom that he or she has been given through the work of Christ. If you have that freedom, don't take lightly what it cost. And don't surrender that freedom to those who even would persecute you to try and get you to give it up.