

Galatians 4 (Part 3): 21-31 • Lessons from Abraham

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Galatians chapter 4. This is the third part of this chapter— I guess, our look at this chapter. I think that we've been going through Galatians so long now that you ought to have it down as far as what this is all about, and I would begin to wonder if perhaps I was maybe preaching to the choir about this message of no righteousness through the law but only through grace. We even sang about it.

By the way, wasn't that a lovely worship time? I just felt like the Lord was just really ministering worship this morning, which is always delightful. I mean, worship is one of those things that— I mean, it's always good, but there are times when it just seems to minister more than others. I don't really understand sometimes what makes the difference, but it was delightful.

Anyway, back to Galatians. I would begin to think that maybe I should probably just move on. Let's go to the next book because I think you guys have this one down; if it weren't for the fact that I continue to field questions, both from the body of Christ here at Calvary Chapel as well as the incredible amount of emails and notes that I get weekly from Christians around the world who are living in fear of hell, who are confused about their relationship as a believer to the law.

I had a gal write me just this past week. Raised in church, she was telling me how on her dad's side— I think there's like 3 pastors and 3 missionaries and plenty of background and history and stuff like that—but writing me questions about, how exactly do we keep the Sabbath again? Because I know it says in the 10 Commandments and on and on— And I had to write her and say, we're not under the law. Do you remember? We're not under the law; we're under grace.

It's like, even people that know better, they tend to go, oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, that's right. And what I see from that is there's just this propensity, even among believers who have been schooled in the Word and who've been raised in church, and so forth, to just default sometimes to this performance relationship with God.

We see performance in so many other avenues of life, I suppose. We go to work and you write down your hours, or you punch the clock, or you bill somebody for work you've done, or whatever, and it just seeps into our hearts that this is the way life works. We begin to apply that same mentality to God that it's all based on the job I did, and we expect sometimes that God is the same taskmaster that maybe our boss at work is, or the people that we once looked up to who we never quite measured up to in their eyes, or whatever the case might be, always looking for more and better effort.

You ever had anybody in your life who was never quite satisfied with the work you did or the job you did? We take that, and we apply that to God— that same personality from whom we rarely ever got a word of encouragement, or a word of praise or comfort. And we begin to see God that way: as Somebody who's always dangling the idea of hell in front of our face, as motivation to keep working harder. If I can't get you to work better, work harder, work stronger, be a better Christian, well, I'll dangle hell in front of your eyes, and maybe that'll help. Maybe that'll motivate you to try a little harder, to do a little better.

You'd be shocked how many Christians live under this kind of a cloud, this sort of mentality. Paul would refer to that belief system as slavery. He calls it slavery, and he has a question for people who are prone to that kind of belief structure and to those who even prefer it.

And here's his question. Look at verse 21; skip down to chapter 4, verse 21. He says:

“Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?”
(ESV)

Stop there, please, and pray with me.

Heavenly Father, use this time this morning. Minister to our hearts. We ask it in Jesus' precious name, amen.

The reason I wanted to just start with the first verse that we're looking at here—and I'm trusting we're going to get through the rest of the chapter today, but that first verse is critical for us to pause for a moment and look at because it is a very powerful rhetorical question by the apostle, where he says, you who are either prone to being under the law or you who prefer to be under the law, do you not hear? Are you not listening to the law?

The reason that's so important is because it is so descriptive many times of Christians. We don't think it through. When Paul says, do you not listen to the law? He's really asking the question, have you not thought this thing through to its ultimate end?

Let me put this question up on the screen for you again.

Galatians 4:21

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?

Tell me (he says), you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?

Now, the reason I wanted to put it up there is because, first of all, there are—you'll notice there are two instances of the word, law in that verse. Do you notice that? “*Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?*” Strangely enough, each of those instances of the word, law have different meanings— just to be interesting, I suppose.

The first occurrence of the word, law, is the way you and I would, maybe, tend to think of it. It's that standard of rules that people try to live by in order to be made righteous before God. We need to—in other words, in the context of, we need to keep the law.

But the second reference to the word, law, that occurs in that verse doesn't just mean what we keep; it refers to the body of scripture in the first 5 books of the Old Testament that we call the Torah, Genesis through Deuteronomy. And so, what Paul is saying basically here—can I give you a Pastor Paul's paraphrase? (I'm sorry, the next one there, Jane) is— here's my paraphrase of this verse:

Galatians 4:21

Tell me, you who want to earn your righteous standing by your works, have you ever read the Scripture?

Tell me, you who want to earn your righteous standing by your works, have you ever read the Scripture?

That's what Paul is saying in that verse. Okay? And the reason Paul feels the need to ask this question is because, many times, in our rush to respond to what someone is telling us, we fail to stop and really listen to God's Word. I find this—and what I mean by our rush to respond is that there are all kinds of

people out there that are just like the folks who infiltrated the churches in Galatia who are telling us: Here's what you got to do; here's what you got to do; here's what you got to do. And in our rush to respond to that, we don't often stop and think through: What are the implications of what they're saying to me, and what does the Word of God— what is the Word of God telling me related to that as well?

And so, Paul is going to use the remainder of this chapter to unpack the Old Testament—and not all of it by any stretch, but some aspects of the Old Testament—to shed more light on the thought process, thinking through the implications of these individuals who have come and said, keep the law; you've got to keep the law, and so forth. So, he's saying, don't you listen to the law? Have you ever listened? Have you ever listened and heard it speak and the things that it is saying?

And so, he begins this way; look at verse 22 in your Bible. He says—and this is, of course, the perfect way to begin:

“For it is written (Right? Because we're going back to the Word here; 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 (which means a natural way of being born), while the son of the free woman was born through promise.”

Now, stop there, alright? Let me catch you up on the story that Paul is assuming his audience knows. It's essentially the story— most of you know it—the story of Abraham and Sarah. And you remember, too, that Abraham was called to leave his country, his family behind and go to a brand-new land in Canaan, where God told him that all of his descendants who came after him would inherit this land. The problem was Abraham didn't have any descendants; he didn't have any children. And the problem was his wife was barren; she could not conceive. And so, the closest heir of anything Abraham owned or was given by the Lord would be to a servant in his house.

But God insisted that Abraham would one day have his own son, who would be heir to the promise, and Abraham and Sarah tried to hang on to that promise for a long time. But they waited, and they waited, and they waited. Some people say they waited close to 30 years, and that's a long time to wait.

I don't know about you, but I can be very impatient when it comes to anything in life where God is forcing me to wait. I don't like waiting at all. I mean, there's nothing about waiting that I like. And yet— and one of the reasons is that

waiting depletes us. Have you noticed that? It depletes our expectation; it depletes our hope; it depletes our joy.

And then we run into some scriptures that say, yeah, but those who wait on the Lord will actually renew those things. They will renew their strength; they will renew their joy; they will renew their hope. And then, I come to realize that there are different kinds of waiting: waiting on the Lord and just waiting for something to happen. When you're just waiting for something to happen, you will be depleted.

Abraham and Sarah eventually were depleted in their ability to continue waiting, so they concocted an idea between the two of them to bring about God's promise with a little help. Sarah went to Abraham and said, apparently, God needs a little help to bring about this promise, so she gave her Egyptian maidservant, Hagar, to Abraham to have a child with her, and then Sarah would raise the child as her own. Abraham agreed to it, and Hagar ended up giving birth to a child by the name of Ishmael. That was when Abraham, by the way, was 86 years old. And God just let that go and didn't really say much.

Then, when Abraham was 100 years old, God came to him again and He reiterated that He was going to give him a son through Sarah. And you know what Abraham did? It says he fell on his face and laughed. You know something? He fell on his face and laughed because he didn't believe what God said? No.

He laughed in amazement. Part of me wonders if Abraham was laughing at his own stupidity, at thinking that God somehow needed his help to bring about His promise because God is always able to bring about his own promises.

But right after that, Abraham spoke to the Lord, and I want to show you what he said here. I'll put this on the screen from Genesis chapter 17. It says:

Genesis 17:18-19 (ESV)

And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him."

And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" (And that means under your blessing.) God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. (By the way, Isaac means laughter,

and) *I will establish my covenant with him (not Ishmael) as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.*”

Okay, now, let's go back to Galatians chapter 4. Look in your Bible. Let's see what the apostle has to say about all this, beginning in verse 24. He says:

“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 (meaning the one who is not bearing)
will be more than those of the one who has a husband.”*

This is what Paul is saying to the Galatians: that each of these women that Abraham had a child with, they're a picture to you and I.

First of all, they show us things that are very important. Sarah was free, and Hagar was a slave girl, okay?

Second thing he wants you and I to see is that the children they had are also a picture. Ishmael was born from the flesh— how do I want to say that? He was born as a work of the flesh—that's probably the better way to say it. Isaac, on the other hand, was born as the result of a promise. Okay?

Therefore, we have these two boys representing different things. Ishmael represents those who are born of the flesh and work to please God by works, and Isaac is a picture of someone who is born supernaturally and does not work to please according to the flesh but rather according to a promise. That's the life that you and I have been born into: the life of promise, not the life of the flesh.

You see, because Sarah was way beyond childbearing years (she was 90 years old when she gave birth to Isaac), the baby factory had long since shut down Sarah's body. And she knew it. She knew it. Abraham knew it—that's why he laughed when God said this is what's going to happen. How did she end up having a baby? Because God is able to do anything, and God brought Isaac through a promise. He made a promise and He kept it.

But look at how He kept it. He kept it in circumstances that were nothing short of miraculous, supernatural. In other words, Isaac represents those who are born supernaturally as the result of a promise, and Ishmael is representative of those who are born simply as a result of the flesh.

What did Jesus say about this? He said: *“Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.”* (John 3:6) And that is why—he told Nicodemus—that’s why we must be not just born; we must be born again.

Let me show you how the apostle John puts it. I’ll put this up on the screen.
John chapter 1:

John 1:12-13 (NIV)

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he (God) gave the right to (us, to) become children of God— (How were we born? Were we born into a Christian home? Were we born to Christian parents? No. He says) children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

That’s me and you. We’ve been born of God. We are a fulfillment of the picture of Isaac, not Ishmael. To go back under the law is to revert back to that picture of law-keeping, living by the flesh, doing things of the flesh that is more the picture of Ishmael.

Look what Paul says in verse 28, and this is why he says this. He says:

“Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.”

Okay. Get it? Born not of natural means. And here’s the deal: People who are trying to earn their way into God’s favor will never be able to understand this life of faith that we have laid hold of. They’ll say: No, you got to do this; you got to do that; it’s not just believing; you got to also be baptized; you got to also speak in tongues; you have to do this; you have to—and you got to live a good life. There’s a lot of Christians that think that, too. You got to live a good life. They’re trying to earn their way into God’s favor.

And to underscore that, Paul cites another picture. He's looking at verse 29. He says:

“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.”

And this is a reference—it's actually a very brief reference in the Scripture in chapter 21 of Genesis where it says that Isaac was mocking—excuse me, Ishmael was mocking Isaac at Isaac's weaning party. (They would actually have a feast when a child was weaned.) And Sarah saw it, and she came to her husband and said, get rid of that slave woman and her child; send them away. And Abraham was, understandably, grieved because it involved his son. But yet the Lord spoke to Abraham, and He said, listen to your wife.

Here's what Paul says about it. Look. Verse 30 in your Bible:

“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.””

Now, why did Paul tell this? What's his conclusion in giving us these? He's basically saying this: You can't—there is no inheritance for the slave child. There's no inheritance.

Do you guys understand the slave child is the picture of trying to please God by works? And he says there's no sharing of the inheritance between these two. It only comes to the one who is born as the result of a promise. You can't mix legalism and grace. There's no possible way to do that. You can't—

But yet Christians are trying. They're trying. There are churches that are devoted to being a Christian, but you got to keep the Sabbath. There are churches that are devoted to being a Christian, but you got to do this as well. And they're trying to mix Isaac and Ishmael.

Paul is saying here: No, the inheritance only comes to the child who comes by faith according to God's promise. And that's the point. There is no reward for those who would seek to earn God's favor through self-effort.

What's Paul's conclusion? Verse 31:

“So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.”

It's a great conclusion because, you see, Paul understood what it meant to be a slave to a performance track. Because remember, this is a man who was a Pharisee and lived his life as a Pharisee for many years. But now that he met Jesus, he knew what it was to be free from the demands of the law and to live as a son and not a slave.

Do you know the Jews? The Jews didn't like people calling God, Father, because that was considered to be wrong and potentially even blasphemous. Jesus did it a lot, and in fact, at one point, He even asked the people as they were picking up stones. He said, why do you stone me? Is it for the miracles that I'm doing among you? They said, no, not for those, but because you call God your Father, thus claiming yourself to be equal with God.

Well, the fact of the matter is, Jesus is equal with God. But the point is, you can call God, Father, without inferring that. You call Him, Father. Why? Because you're a child. You've been made a child. What does that say about your relationship with God? It means you're not a servant. It means you're not a slave. You are a child. You are part of the family. Right?

And so that's why Paul ends this chapter by saying, “...*brothers, we are not children of the slave woman.*” We're not slaves. We are children of God. We are children of the free woman— meaning that we call God, Father. Paul was so blown away by that. He couldn't imagine somebody wanting to go backwards.

We keep saying over and over again that we're free. How are we free? How exactly are we free? Well, we've been set free from the taskmaster of trying to earn God's favor because He is a taskmaster. Because you know what? Those who are trying to earn God's favor will never know for sure if they've reached it.

They will never have any confidence in their lives that they have reached that level of satisfaction. You never know. You're doing this; you're doing that; have you done everything you need to do? Well, I hope. Oh, what a horrible way to live. And that is why Paul writes what he does.

We're not going to look at chapter 5, but I want to read the first verse of chapter 5. And he says this:

“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

And the reason this is such an important verse that we're going to use to talk about and we're going to relate to this verse to the final two chapters of this

book is because it reminds us of something very important. It reminds us that after having been set free, it is possible to go back and live under a yoke of slavery.

That's what Paul's saying here. It's for freedom. It's so that you would be free that God has set you free. Now, don't go back and live a life under a yoke of slavery. And, of course, the yoke of slavery he's talking about here is slavery to the law, to law-keeping, and so forth.

But one of the reasons why this message about not living under the law really bothers some people is because they don't know how to live their life in Christ outside of rules. They really don't know how to do it. They'll say: But pastor, you're telling me that we don't live according to the law. We live according to grace.

I don't know what that means. I don't know how that's going to keep me from not sinning. I understand how rules keep me from not sinning. It just says, don't do that; don't go there; don't talk to this person; don't hang out with them and don't ever do that. I get it. I get how that works.

I see how a person can live a life under those rules, and it can keep you safe. But when you're telling me we don't live under rules and regulations, but we live instead under grace, I don't understand that, and I don't see how that's going to keep me walking in righteousness.

And that, brothers and sisters in Jesus, is what Paul is going to cover in the last 2 chapters of Galatians. Now that he has spent 4 full chapters giving example after example, telling them over and over again how legalism doesn't work, now he's going to end—as any good pastor, preacher, teacher will end—with application.

And the application is, now, here is how you walk out your Christian life apart from rules. And he's going to give very specific information that is vital that we understand. So, stay tuned.

Amen.

Let's stand together.