

## **The Superiority of Faith Over Law as Seen in Galatians 2:11-5:26**

**(Part Three of a Four Part Series on  
The Relationship Between Law and Grace)**

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In this letter Paul addressed what he termed a “departure” from the gospel (1:6). This was a serious theological matter and quickly brought with it a forceful response from the Apostle (1:8). Those who introduced their heretical teaching of Christian bondage to the Law had done so amid sharp personal attacks upon Paul, his character (1:10-14), and his apostleship (1:18-2:10). Paul begins his retort to this vexing problem brought on by the Judaizers with a historical discussion of the issue as it relates to the church in general (2:11-21).

(Gal. 2:11-21) But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. (12) For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. (13) The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. (14) But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, “If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews? (15) We are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles; (16) nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified. (17) But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be! (18) For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor. (19) For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God. (20) I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. (21) I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.” [NASB]

Paul recalls how Peter—a Jew—while visiting in Syrian Antioch had dispensed with certain elements of the Law in His personal life, but upon the arrival of other more strict observers of the Law, Peter hypocritically separated himself from the Gentiles. Paul recalls how he rebuked Peter, asking if he, being a Jew, lived like a Gentile, how could he justify compelling the Gentiles to live like Jews? After all, the Law never justified

anyone (2:16). (Paul here makes no distinction between the ceremonial and moral aspects of the Law.)

Paul goes on to address the question of whether justification by faith and the believer's release from the curse of the Law makes Christ the cause of sin. The answer is a resounding "No." Such thinking as Paul now refutes is characteristic of legalism. It goes like this: "The teaching of grace and release from the Law produces "lawlessness" (antinomianism). But such legalistic thinking results not in righteousness, but a rebuilding of what was once destroyed (the curse of the Law) and a re-imprisonment of the soul as a transgressor, in bondage to the penalty of the Law. Legalism never produces true righteousness; it only makes its adherents slaves and prisoners. Paul says in verse 19, "For through the Law I died to the Law, that I might live to God." What does this mean? How does "dying to the Law" result in the ability to live to God? He explains in verse 20 the truth to which legalists are blind, that those who are in Christ have already died with Christ and that all of the requirements of the Law have been fully satisfied. This is not a setting aside of the Law, but literally the fulfillment of the requirements of the Law in Christ. As such, grace becomes not an excuse to sin, but the power to continue serving God in spite of the fact that we frequently fail—for we are yet imperfect in soul and body. The Apostle John says those who taut grace as a license to sin do not know Christ or the power of the Spirit of God (*cf.*, 1 Jn. 1:1-6; 3:9-10). Are we so foolish as to think that the Law could keep one from sin where the living and indwelling Christ and His Holy Spirit did not? That, of course, is the philosophy of legalism—that righteousness comes through external regulation—but as Paul concludes in verse 21, if that were true, then Christ died in vain. For Christians to rebuild the Law is to "nullify the grace of God." Paul next turns his attention to the question of what, if any, use the Law has for the Christian.

(Gal. 3:1-9) You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? (2) This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? (3) Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? (4) Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? (5) So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? (3:6) Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. (7) Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. (8) The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU." (9) So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer. [NASB]

Paul begins with a severe reprimand: "You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you." The implication is clear: the Galatians had fallen, as it were, under the influence of a "spell-caster." These are tough words both for the Galatians and for those who had

misled them. Paul's first argumentative question is simply this "Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?" He has a purpose in asking such a question. The Galatians had received the Spirit of God at the time they placed their faith in Christ; this had undoubtedly resulted in the manifest presence of the Spirit through the exercise of spiritual gifts within the Church. Paul knew this. He wants them now to consider the absurdity of their paradigm shift from grace to law. If the Spirit (the evidence of salvation in progress) could not be attained on the basis of law, but only by faith, how could they now think that the process of salvation can be completed by observance of the Law—an entirely different principle, already shown to be weak and ineffective? It is easy to see why Paul uses the analogy of witchcraft, for to Paul only one under an evil spell could be so thoroughly deceived. Will a man enter salvation by faith and then seek to complete that salvation by the deeds of the Law? That would be like bringing a boat with a thousand horsepower engine up to full speed, and then switching off the engine and attempting to maintain the momentum with half of a broken paddle! If the Law had sanctifying power, Christ would not have had to die in the first place (*cf.*, 2:21)!

In 3:6-9 Paul makes the case that faith—as the means of obtaining righteousness before God—was established long before the Law was given, since Abraham "believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Thus the principle was established in the Old Testament that justification is by faith, and the Law, which came later could not change that; it could only lead men to the conclusion that they need God's forgiveness and righteousness, supplied by His perfect Messiah, of which the Old Testament sacrifices were merely a prefigurement.

(Gal. 3:10-18) For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM." (11) Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, "THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH." (12) However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, "HE WHO PRACTICES THEM SHALL LIVE BY THEM." (13) Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE"—(14) in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (15) Brethren, I speak in terms of human relations: even though it is only a man's covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it. (16) Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, "And to seeds," as referring to many, but rather to one," And to your seed," that is, Christ. (17) What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. (18) For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise. [NASB]

Paul now begins to deal with the true effect of the Law (3:10-18) and how this relates to God's intended purpose for the Law (3:19-4:7). We may well skip to Paul's question in 4:21, "*Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law?*" What does the Law accomplish? Paul says it places one under a curse (3:10), that it has no power to justify (v. 11), and that the Law is not of faith (v. 12). This ought to be obvious, but Paul is pointing out that faith and Law are two completely incompatible principles. What is the implication of this statement? Simply put, one who walks by the Law is not walking by faith. Could it be that legalists do not realize that in looking to the Law they are rejecting the principle of faith? The incompatibility of the two is certainly evident in this passage. One might ask how faith and Law could be incompatible if they both have their origin in God, but in so saying they miss the point of the Law entirely; the Law was not intended to be a means of obtaining righteousness, but as a light to show man his sinfulness. When I go into a lavatory, I turn on the light so I can see that my face or hands are dirty. I don't wash with the light, I wash with soap, because soap has the power to cleanse, whereas light has only the power to reveal my need. In the same way, the Law has only the ability to reveal my sin, but it has no power to cleanse.

Legalists object that the Law is not too difficult to keep, often citing Deuteronomy 30:11-14. However, when God commanded the children of Israel to keep the Law (Deut. 29:9) and told them that it would not be too difficult for them (Deut. 30:11-14), he was referring not to the Moral Law alone, but to the keeping of the whole Law, comprehensively, which through the sacrificial system made provision (at least typically and symbolically) for failure to perfectly keep the standard of holiness expressed in the moral code. In other words, the provision of sacrifice under the Law anticipated failure on the part of the worshipers to keep the moral code (even outwardly, to say nothing of keeping it inwardly), yet when the provisions of the sacrificial system were applied, the Law, when viewed comprehensively, was considered to have been kept. In other words, the system contained a remedy of sorts, albeit only "typical" (symbolically prophetic) of God's ultimate sacrifice of His Son. The point is that while the Law, as a comprehensive system, could be kept, the moral code embedded within the Law could not be kept by men in their fallen state. When legalists imply that the Law can be kept, they mean that the moral code can be kept. This is a thoroughly unbiblical idea, even from a strictly Old Testament perspective; and not only is it an unbiblical idea, it is contrary to the principle of faith. Faith does not say, "What can I do to establish my own righteousness," but rather, "I believe that God has done for me what I could not do for myself." These two principles are mutually exclusive—to live by one is to deny the other.

Some people deny the incompatibility between faith and the Law, but Paul is clear on this point and he quotes Leviticus 18:5, from the Torah itself, as support. It was Christ who redeemed us from the curse of the Law (v. 13) in order that we might receive the blessing of the promises made to Abraham (of salvation) and the promise of the Holy Spirit (Jer. 31:31-33) on the basis of faith alone. Faith is the divinely appointed means of obtaining righteousness, and the Law which came four hundred years afterward did not, indeed

could not change that (vv. 16-18), for the covenant of promise had already been ratified (v. 15). Having shown that the Law is not of faith, nor even compatible with faith, Paul now turns his attention to the true purpose of the Law.

(Gal. 3:19-4:7) Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made. (20) Now a mediator is not for one party only—whereas God is only one. (21) Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. (22) But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. (23) But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. (24) Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. (25) But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. (26) For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. (27) For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. (28) There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (29) And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise. (4:1) Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, (2) but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. (3) So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. (4) But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, (5) so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. (6) Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" (7) Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God. [NASB]

Paul here addresses the purpose of the Law. In his classic style he asks a question, answers it up front, and then develops and supports his answer. He begins with the question: "Why the Law then?" In other words, given what has already been said—that the promise (of salvation) was by faith, and the Law is not of faith—he now addresses what must certainly be the question remaining in the minds of his hearers: If the promise was to be received by faith, why did God subsequently give the Law, 430 years later? His answer is straightforward: the Law was added because of transgressions (sins) until Christ, the promised seed, should come. In other words, Paul says that the Law was a "stopgap" measure, never intended to be permanent. (It was, as it were, a "dressing," until the wound could be cured.) He quickly addresses an additional question sure to arise in the minds of his readers: If faith and law are incompatible principles, is the Law somehow contrary to the promises of God? Paul's answer is "No," the Law does not contradict the promise by faith simply because the Law was never an alternative to faith. That is to say: the Law was never intended as a means of obtaining righteousness; its only

purpose was to shed enough light in the darkness to point the way to the only true solution to the problem of sin, that solution is Christ (vv. 23-24). The Law pointed the way to Christ through the power of condemnation (foreclosing all options save one—faith in Christ alone). Some insist that those who teach grace through faith alone as the means of obtaining the promise of salvation are opposed to the Law (antinomians). That is not true. The Law, properly understood, was never an alternative to faith—it is rather an inducement to faith, but once faith appears, the Law serves no further purpose; indeed its continued application would be injurious to faith. Those who teach grace through faith alone as the means of obtaining the promises simply understand the proper relationship between the Law and faith. One could make the case that the real “antinomians” are those who distort the purpose of the Law by attempting to make it into something that it is not, thus perverting the true intent of the Law.

(Gal. 4:8-20) However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. (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? (10) You observe days and months and seasons and years. (11) I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain. (12) I beg of you, brethren, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong; (13) but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; (14) and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself. (15) Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. (16) So have I become your enemy by telling you the truth? (17) They eagerly seek you, not commendably, but they wish to shut you out so that you will seek them. (18) But it is good always to be eagerly sought in a commendable manner, and not only when I am present with you. (19) My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you—(20) but I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you. [NASB]

Paul reminds the Galatians that before they came to know God, or rather came to be known by him—indicating God’s sovereignty in their salvation—they were slaves of a religion consisting of rules and regulations. These things, Paul says, are “weak” and “worthless,” mere “elemental” (elementary) things. Paul expressed his concern that perhaps his ministry has been in vain, for (by implication) Paul’s ministry, and by extension all of his apostolic letters, were tuned to a completely different frequency—indeed a different form of religion. This is serious talk, and it underscores Paul’s firm belief that faith and Law are completely incompatible.

(Gal. 4:21-31) Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law? (22) For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and

one by the free woman. (23) But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise. (24) This is allegorically speaking, for these women are two covenants: one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. (25) Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. (26) But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. (27) For it is written, “REJOICE, BARREN WOMAN WHO DOES NOT BEAR; BREAK FORTH AND SHOUT, YOU WHO ARE NOT IN LABOR; FOR MORE NUMEROUS ARE THE CHILDREN OF THE DESOLATE THAN OF THE ONE WHO HAS A HUSBAND.” (28) And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. (29) But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. (30) But what does the Scripture say? “CAST OUT THE BONDWOMAN AND HER SON, FOR THE SON OF THE BONDWOMAN SHALL NOT BE AN HEIR WITH THE SON OF THE FREE WOMAN.” (31) So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman. [NASB]

Paul now draws upon familiar source material from the Old Testament. He is not interpreting that material, merely using it as an analogy to illustrate his point. The legalists among them advocated a blending of faith and law, but Paul warns that faith cannot co-exist with law. The very presence of law is injurious to faith, for it tells us to draw close to God through self-regulation, and to measure our progress by the same. Paul’s point is that just as Isaac and Ishmael could not co-exist together, without Ishmael’s presence being detrimental to the fulfillment of the promise to Isaac, neither can faith and law co-exist. Any attempt to combine faith and law will ultimately end in the destruction of faith—for faith is by definition trusting someone else to do what one acknowledges he cannot do for himself. Just as God commanded that the bondwoman and her son were to be cast out, so now Paul applies the same to the Law—there is simply no place for legalism in the life of faith. Legalism is destructive to faith, and the promises of God can only be realized by faith.

(Gal. 5:1-12) It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. (2) Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. (3) And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. (4) You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. (5) For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. (6) For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love. (7) You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? (8) This persuasion did not come from Him who calls you. (9) A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough. (10) I have confidence in you in the Lord that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you will bear his judgment, whoever he is. (11) But I, brethren, if I still preach

circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the Cross has been abolished. (12) I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves. [NASB]

The Law represents slavery, and Paul urged the Galatian believers, having been freed from that yoke, not to return to it. His warning in verses 2-4 is very poignant. He tells them that if they return to the Law, Christ will be of no benefit to them. He says in verse 4, “*You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.*” These were people who having made a profession of faith in Christ were seeking to be perfected in the flesh (according to the Law, *cf.* 3:3), and in so doing were manifesting the shallowness of their faith. Paul has in mind that if those in the Galatian churches who are involved don’t heed his warning they may be found to have not been true believers at all. This is consistent with other New Testament teaching regarding personal apostasy (1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Pt 2:1-21; 1 Jn. 2:19; Heb. 3:1-14; 6:4-12; 10:26-31; 12:14-29). [For further reading on personal apostasy see: *The Biblical Doctrine of Personal Apostasy*, by the author, online at [www.BiblicalReader.com](http://www.BiblicalReader.com).]

It is faith, not the Law (and certainly not faith + Law) that leads to righteousness (v. 5). The Law (symbolized by circumcision) means nothing to those who are in Christ (v. 6). Before the legalists entered the picture, the Galatians were running well, but the legalists proved to be a stumbling block to their faith (v. 7). Paul asserts that this legalism did not come from God (v. 8), and he was concerned that the entire church could become corrupted by this false teaching (v. 9). Nevertheless, he expresses confidence in the Galatians, that they will adopt the correct understanding of this issue—that salvation (all of it, from start to finish) is all of faith and none of works (vv. 10-12). (That isn’t to say that faith doesn’t result in works—true faith always results in works, but not works of the Law—under threat of penalty—but obedience from a transformed, and grateful heart, flooded with joy at pleasing God.

(Gal. 5:13-26) For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. (14) For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.” (15) But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. (16) But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. (17) For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. (18) But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. (19) Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, (20) idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, (21) envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (22) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, (23) gentleness, self-

control; against such things there is no law. (24) Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (25) If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. (26) Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another. [NASB]

Does freedom from the Law mean freedom to sin? Certainly not! It means freedom to live apart from condemnation. It means freedom to please God out of a heart of love, joy, and gratitude. The Law is completely fulfilled by love, and that is Christ's command to His Church (Jn. 13:34)—what more do we need? We are saved by grace through faith, and commanded, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, to love one another. What advantage does the Law have to offer such a person?

Given what Paul has said, the question that naturally arises is this: Does the Law have relevance in the present era? Of course, the Law is of two parts. There is in the Law that part wherein the perfection and holiness of God is seen, and which the Law merely illuminates (though dimly in comparison to Christ); and there is that part which prescribed the obligations of the Jewish nation with respect to the covenant made with them (including the civil, and ceremonial/sacrificial elements). The knowledge of God, and the holiness He requires will always result in condemnation to those who fall short of His perfection—which is all humanity. However, the covenantal aspect of the Law, that is, its operative principle of external working (through regulations, penalties, ceremonies, etc.) has been replaced by the inner working of the Spirit under the new covenant. Sin is still sin. But the operative principle has changed: the “Law” (the moral compass) is now written within, and transgressions are not the domain of civil or ceremonial/sacrificial law, they are matters of the heart (Jer. 31:31-33). What the Law could not do working from without, the implanted law (the Law of the Spirit) accomplishes from within; thus is the demise of the principle of externalism, and there can be no return to it—it was replaced because it was inferior. What this means is that the proper pursuit of righteousness is forevermore removed from the realm of externalism, and centered in the only place from which personal righteousness can originate—from within the redeemed and sanctified heart, wherein the Spirit of God dwells and performs His work. Those who wish to return to the Law in order to bring about righteousness fail to understand the true nature of the task—it is not the mere regulation of behavior, it is the transformation of soul and spirit by the power of the gospel, a task which can only be accomplished through faith.

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