

Galatians 5:2-12; 6:12-16

The Issue of Circumcision and Justification

An Outline

- I. Circumcision Nullifies Grace (Galatians 5:2-4)
 - A. If you get circumcised, Christ will be of no value (v. 2).
 - B. Circumcision obligates obedience to whole law (v. 3).
 - C. Seeking justification by law is to fall from grace (v. 4).
 - II. Justification is by Faith (Galatians 5:5-6).
 - A. By Faith through the Spirit we await our hope of righteousness (v. 5).
 - B. In Christ neither circumcision or uncircumcision has any value (v. 6a).
 - C. Only faith expressed through love counts (v. 6b).
 - III. The Galatians Were Sidetracked (Galatians 5:7-12)
 - A. Galatians started well but got sidetracked from the truth (v. 7).
 - B. Agitators are to be avoided (vv. 8-9).
 1. Agitators are not of God (v. 8).
 2. They are like spreading yeast, corrupting everything (v. 9).
 - C. God will resolve by guiding you and punishing them (v. 10).
 - IV. Paul Never Preached Circumcision (Galatians 5:11-12).
 - A. Persecution of Paul proves he never preached circumcision (v. 11a).
 - B. Preaching circumcision negates the offense of the cross (v. 11b).
 - C. Agitators should emasculate themselves (v. 12).
- 5:13 through 6:11 -----
- V. Agitators Seek Notoriety, Avoid Persecution and Practice Hypocrisy (Galatians 6:12-13)
 - A. Agitators seek to impress people with external ritual (v. 12a).
 - B. Agitators seek to avoid persecution from the Jews (v. 12b).
 - C. Agitators are hypocrites regarding obedience to the Law (v. 13).
 - VI. Paul Boasts only in being new in Christ (vv. 15-16).
 - A. Paul's boast only in Christ (v. 14).
 - B. Circumcision and uncircumcision mean nothing , only the new creation (v. 15).
 - C. The true Israel of God will follow this Gospel to find peace and mercy (v. 16).

Questions for Discussion

1. **Paul was circumcised, as were the apostles. Timothy would be circumcised. How can he tell the Galatians that if they get circumcised, Christ would be of no value to them? (Galatians 5:2-6).**

The difference between Paul (with Peter and Timothy) and the Galatians lies at the crux of Paul's argument in Galatians. The act of circumcision was not the problem, but rather what they were depending on for their justification, that is, their right standing with God. If they thought they could achieve this right standing by their own good works, they would have missed the whole point of the Law and the purpose of Christ's sacrifice. The Law only revealed their sinfulness and their inability to keep it to the standard that God required, namely, perfection. Any violation of any part of the Law would make them a lawbreaker and condemned (cf. James 2:10). But Christ did what they could not do for themselves by being a perfect substitute and sacrifice. He became sin (our sin) and we became the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21). As Paul wrote in Galatians 2:21, "If righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing." When Timothy, a half-Jew, was circumcised (Acts 16:3), Paul did it in order to reach the Jews for Christ (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). Titus, a Gentile, however, was not circumcised in order for to establish the Gospel of grace through faith (Titus 2:3-5).

2. **Paul says justification is by faith apart from works (Romans 3:28). James says justification is by faith plus works (James 2:24). Which is it? And is it that important?**

Martin Luther, the leader of the Protestant Reformation, wrestled with the apparent conflict between Paul and James. Protestants would side with Paul and Catholics would side with James. But there is no conflict when both are properly understood. Paul and James come from two different perspectives. Paul presents justification before God, while James is concerned with justification before men. We read in Romans 3:20, "No one will be declared righteous **in God's sight** by the works of the law" while in James 2:10 we read, "**Show me** your faith without deeds, and **I will show you** my faith by my deeds." Also, while Paul rejects works in justification, he would agree with James that true faith is a "working" faith. In other words, genuine faith will manifest itself in good works. So also Paul, immediately after declaring that we are "saved by grace through faith," adds, "we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works" (Ephesians 2:10). And to the Galatians, he writes that the only thing that counts with God is "faith working through love" Galatians 5:6); that is, a "working" faith that expresses itself in love.

Note 1: Paul makes a very stark contrast between the heart that works, trusting in the flesh, versus the heart that believes, trusting in the Spirit. The former is self-reliant and seeks personal achievement and recognition. The latter is God-reliant, rejoices in God and seeks His glory. The former attempts to attain righteousness on its own terms while the latter trusts God to work in His way and on His terms. Only when we live by faith can we truly love, because genuine faith removes guilt, fear and greed, which are the chief roadblocks to genuine love for others.

Note 2: Faith is also not only a past faith (our justification) but also a present and ongoing faith (sanctification). So Paul writes, "In the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed - a righteousness that is by faith from first to last (lit. from faith to faith), just as it is written: 'the righteous will live by faith'" (Romans 1:17). We must realize that we not only begin in faith, we continue in faith (Galatians 3:3; Philippians 2:12-13; Hebrews 13:21), and it is by faith that we trust that God will complete our transformation into the perfect righteousness of God (Galatians 5:5; Philippians 1:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:23). So, it is truly God working in our justification, sanctification and glorification. This is what we embrace by faith. When later we read of "the works of the flesh" versus "the fruit of the Spirit" versus the "works of the flesh," we can see that while the former is done by us, the latter is produced by God.

Note 3: We must beware of the “gratitude ethic,” which says that since God has done so much for me, I must devote my life to “paying Him back.” When we have this frame of mind, we turn God’s gift into a loan to be paid back. It turns the gift into a business transaction. It diminishes the sufficiency of the cross of Christ. It insults the infinite value of His sacrifice. To such people the writer of Hebrews warns of severe judgment: “How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?” (Hebrews 10:29). Finally, the “gratitude ethic” fails to recognize that Christ’s sacrifice for us was not merely a past act. His blood covers all our sins, past, present and future (Hebrews 9:26; 10:11-12, 14). We did not start with Christ only to try to finish in our own strength (Galatians 3:3).

3. What lines of reasoning does Paul use to persuade the Galatians to reject the false Gospel of the Judaizers?

(1) Paul warns them the false Gospel does not come from God (Galatians 5:7-8). He tells them to stay on the track they were on when they began their spiritual race. The Judaizers were trying to sidetrack them from “obeying the truth” by teaching them a false gospel of salvation by works, which was not given by revelation of God but contrived by men (cf. Romans 10:1-4).

(2) Paul warns them that the false Gospel will spread like a cancer. He quotes a proverb: “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough” (Galatians 5:9). The pervasive corruption of false teaching by the Judaizers would corrupt the whole church. He uses the same language with respect to the sin of incest overlooked by the Corinthian congregation in 1 Corinthians 5:6. Jesus also warned His disciples about the “leaven of the Pharisees” (Matthew 16:6). Consequently, what the Judaizers were teaching was not a “little” error.

(3) Paul warns them against trusting anything that takes away from the sufficiency of the cross of Christ. Paul says that if he preached circumcision (i.e. the Law), he would no longer be persecuted, for he would be in agreement with those who trusted in the Law. But the message of the cross, which says that the Law cannot save, was an offense to those who sought to gain their right standing with God through the Law (Galatians 5:11).

(4) Paul warned against the cowardly motives of the Judaizers, who preached circumcision because they feared persecution and sought the favor of the Jews (Galatians 6:12).

(5) Paul warned against the hypocrisy of the Judaizers, for while they required the Gentiles to get circumcised, they themselves did not keep the Law as the Law required (Galatians 6:13). They were not concerned about true circumcision, namely, the circumcision of the heart, only that of the flesh, which meant nothing (cf. Romans 2:29; in the OT see Jeremiah 4:4; Deuteronomy 30:6).

4. How does Paul handle his frustration with the Galatians?

(1) Paul declares His confidence in the Lord to guide the Galatians to choose the correct path; He also trusts that God will judge the Judaizers (Galatians 5:10). He has faithfully declared the true Gospel to them with clarity, earnestness and affection. Now, he simply commits them to the Lord.

On the other hand, he wishes emasculation on the Judaizers, perhaps a humorous jab in view of the Judaizers commitment to circumcision. If they were emasculated, at the very least they could not biologically reproduce themselves. But ultimately, he commits them also to the Lord, albeit for judgment.

Note: *In an often misunderstood passage, 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, Paul writes about building on the one and only foundation, Jesus Christ. The context and message of this passage has to do with Christian ministry, not Christian character. Paul is concerned that all ministers of the Gospel build with good material, like faith working through love (Galatians 5:6), as opposed to worthless material, like circumcision and the observance of special days and months and years (Galatians 4:10).*

In the following immediate context, 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, Paul argues that God will destroy anyone who destroys the temple of God, and he writes "you are the temple of God." What the English translations fail to capture is that "you" is in the plural. Paul is not here talking about the temple of our individual bodies (as in 1 Corinthians 6:18-20) but about the Body of Christ, the Church. God will destroy those who seek to destroy the church, for example, by the introduction of false teaching, as the Judaizers were doing. Paul says the same thing in Galatians 5:10: "The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty."

(2) Contrary to the Judaizers, who boast in their good works and their circumcision, Paul declares that he will not boast in anything except in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ (Galatians 6:14). This is echoed in a later letter to the Corinthians: "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2) and "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:30). Circumcision and uncircumcision meant nothing to Paul, because in Christ he is a "new creation," where such weak, miserable, elementary spiritual forces have no place. In Philippians he says that all his human credentials and works are now garbage to him in view of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ (Philippians 3:8).

5. How can we detect false teaching and teachers?

Jesus taught His disciples: "You shall recognize them by their fruit" (Matthew 7:16, 19). When He spoke these words, He follow up with an explanation of true and false disciples. He warned against those who made earnest declarations like "Lord! Lord!" and miraculous claims like "Did we not prophecy in your name...drive out demons in your name...perform many miracles?" yet failed to have a saving relationship with Him ("I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you.'").

In the parallel passage in Luke 6:43-45 Jesus further explained what He meant by fruit. He meant the product of the heart with an emphasis on speech: "For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of." In other words, the teaching will reflect what's in the heart, whether pride, sensuality and greed or humility, purity, and sacrifice. Paul made such a contrast between himself and the Judaizers in Galatians. While we cannot see what is in the heart of a teacher, we can see and hear their teaching. A careful examination of the teaching will reveal the heart also. A message of salvation by grace through faith will reveal one kind of heart. A message of salvation by the works of the Law will reveal another kind of heart.