

Law Limits Righteousness
July 25th, 2010

This next section of the Galatians letter is an application and an appeal. Paul's explaining how this new life in the Spirit applies practically to the Galatians and to us as Christ's people on the earth. And he's appealing to us to wisely choose life under the authority of the Holy Spirit as opposed to a life under the control of law.

Galatians 4:8-11 - Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. 9 But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? 10 You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! 11 I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.

Galatians 4:21-5:1 - Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? 22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. 23 His son by the slave woman was born as the result of human effort, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise.

**24 I am taking these things figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. 25 Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. 26 But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. 27 For it is written:
"Be glad, barren woman,
you who never bore a child;
shout for joy and cry aloud,
you who were never in labor;
because more are the children of the desolate woman
than of her who has a husband."**

28 Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. 29 At that time the son born by human effort persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. 30 But what does Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son." 31 Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.

5:1 It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

Two Basic Problems with Living under the Authority of Law:

First, law is an authority that is externally imposed and therefore does nothing to change or to transform the nature of the person living under it. Sure it may act as a deterrent to alter behavior, but it does nothing to transform a person's being.

Law is a fence which hems people in. The problem with a fence is it attempts to regulate behavior by applying external restraints. People therefore who want to excel at keeping law then externalize everything. By externalizing they can define and quantify. "This is what I should not do. This, on the other hand, is what I should do. This is how I must do it and how many times I must do it." By quantifying the dos and don'ts, law then can define very specifically a form of righteousness that can be walked in.

It's actually possible to do law well. Paul, in his former life, was great at doing law.

Philippians 3:4-6

If others think they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

But here's the problem with living by law. It's possible to have a form of righteousness based on doing law faultlessly, and at the same time to not know or represent the heart of God. It's possible to live law faultlessly and not be transformed by it into the image of our Creator. How do we know that was the case for Saul of Tarsus? While he was living law faultlessly, he was also persecuting the church with zeal that he thought was godliness. He had totally missed God's heart and God's will while living law faultlessly.

So living by law can mould our actions externally, but it can never transform our nature. And that's what God is after, changing our nature so that we look and act like His Son.

Romans 8:29

29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

God wants to conform us to His Son's image. But He doesn't do that by imposing external rules which would never really change us. Rather He wants to impart Christ's nature to us and that nature will then change the way we behave.

Let's take an example of a law imposed externally.

Thou shall not steal. Obviously God doesn't want us to be thieves. But one is not a thief because he steals. Rather, one steals because he is a thief. In that person who steals, there is a fallen nature which leads to them taking what belongs to others. Imposing a law which forbids stealing does limit the activity of thieves, but it doesn't change their nature.

This truth is most easily seen when the mechanism of law's enforcement is removed. Remember what happened in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina? The external rule of law was removed and thieves were free to loot at will. They were free to express their nature.

There's an important principle to be seen here. When the external restraint of law is removed, one's true nature can then be seen. Law actually limits expression of the nature within. But it has no power to change that nature. God's after changing our nature.

That means it's possible to live faultlessly within the confines of the law given by God but to never really express His nature. Have you ever noticed that in Jesus' interactions with the law does He was continually exposing this disconnect between actions and nature? They were living by God's law but totally misrepresenting the nature of God.

For instance, the rich young ruler:

Luke 18:18-24

18 A certain ruler asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

19 "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. 20 You know the commandments: 'You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.'"

21 "All these I have kept since I was a boy," he said.

This young man had lived faultlessly within the external parameters which the law imposed. But somehow in the midst of that he had missed the heart of God.

22 When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

23 When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy.

The law had done nothing to change this young man's heart so that his life reflected God's nature. God's nature is not formed by "don't steal. Don't take what belongs to another." God's nature is to give out of the abundance of what He has. That young man had lived perfectly within the fence of don'ts. And yet he had missed using the great blessing with which he had been blessed to be a blessing to the others around him. And in so doing he missed his opportunity to express the heart of God.

God's not interested in controlling our actions. He wants to change our nature. So then out of that new nature we will look and act like His Son.

The *second* problem with doing law has to do with the limits it imposes. The law was given to Israel to limit transgression. That was a good thing. It served as a fence to hem in

their behavior. The problem is that the same fence that limits transgression also limits righteousness.

The problem with living under law as mentioned previously is that it always leads to externalized righteousness. Once it's externalized then it can be quantified. And so the questions always asked by those living under law are those that seek to define and quantify.

Matthew 18:21-22

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive someone who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

22 Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Peter was seeking to quantify forgiveness and to place limits on it. Surely seven times would be the limit. But if one is keeping score, he's never actually forgiven the first time! After all, love keeps no record of wrongs. True righteousness cannot be quantified. But that's exactly what observance of law does. It quantifies righteousness and therefore limits it.

Luke 10:25-37

25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

26 "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

27 He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

28 "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

If this law expert could define his neighbor then he could justify himself by obeying the parameters of the definition. The problem with doing this is that in defining his neighbor who he is required to love, he would also be defining those who he didn't have to love. And thus righteousness would be limited.

Jesus, of course, shot all that down in the parable of the Good Samaritan that follows. Righteousness cannot be limited. If we see someone in need, we do everything we can to meet that need. That is loving our neighbor.

Another example:

Matthew 23:23-24

23 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel."

The law required that a tenth of one's food be given as a tithe. That brought up an interesting question regarding spices. Should they be tithed? After all, spices aren't really food. They just make food taste better. The teachers of the law determined that to be safe spices should be tithed. So they meticulously did so. But, in the observance of law to that level of minutia, they totally neglected the more important matters of righteousness which the law pointed to – justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

Remember the principle we mentioned earlier. Law limits the expression of one's true nature. So when the external restraint of law is removed, one's true nature can then be seen. That principle is a good thing for those whose nature is fallen and sinful. But what about those whose nature has been renewed? What about those who are now new creatures in Christ Jesus? That nature is not to be repressed and limited. We are to be salt and light in the world. We want our new nature to be seen and experienced. The imposition of law actually keeps that from happening. The principle works both ways.

Here's an example. What law is the vast majority of Christians put under? The tithe! Even though there is no requirement to tithe prescribed in the new covenant, it is a "law" that is placed on most Christians. Well, how would that limit righteousness and suppress our new nature? The inevitable thinking of most Christians who tithe is that by doing so they have met their requirement to give. "Ten percent is God's and the rest is mine to do with as I please." Nothing could be farther from the truth.

God wants us to represent His nature, and He is a liberal and generous giver. He wants us to be the same, and to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit to give wherever and however much He dictates. This is in line with the only teaching on giving in the New Testament which is the principle of generosity.

2 Corinthians 9:6-11

6 Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. 7 Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. 9 As it is written: "They have scattered abroad their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever."

10 Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. 11 You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

The context for this teaching is giving to poor brothers and sisters in Christ and not giving in support of a church or ministry's operations. When we give generously, without the limitations of an artificially imposed standard of giving, what happens? God will

enlarge the harvest of our righteousness! Only when the limitations are removed will God's truly generous nature in us be seen and experienced.

Galatians 5:1

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

The kingdom after all is not the things of external regulation, eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. With the infinite Spirit alive and active within us, there is no limit on how much righteousness we can walk in. Righteousness is more than just a position we have in Christ. It is a lifestyle that finds its expression in doing rightly on behalf of others, especially those who are poor and weak. God wants us to grow in righteousness every day. And He wants nothing to inhibit His righteous nature in us from touching others.

God has done all that is necessary to change our nature. He's given us Christ and the Holy Spirit. It is for freedom to walk in this new life to the fullest that Christ has set us free!