

GALATIANS: THE MAGNA CARTA OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

NEW CITY CHURCH – BASIC TRAINING

QUICK FACTS

Format: 6 chapters, 149 verses

Purpose: To address the false teaching of ‘the Judiazers’ who insisted that Gentile believers in Christ must perform the works of the Mosaic law in order to be true Christians. In other words, they must become Christian *and* Jewish. Faith alone in Christ alone is not enough. “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ” (Galatians 1:6-7).

Author: The Apostle Paul had evangelized & planted churches in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) in AD 47/48 where the gospel of Christ was eagerly embraced (see Acts 13-14). These believers were in danger of abandoning faith alone in Christ alone by adding ‘works’ to their faith as a means of justifying themselves before God. Paul writes to address this alarming situation.

Date: The Jerusalem Council met ~AD 48/49 to discuss issues relating to the influx of Gentile believers into the Church. They deemed it right to insist on faith alone in Christ alone for these new believers deciding that they did not have to become Jewish in order to follow the Messiah. It seems reasonable that if Paul had written after the Jerusalem Council (see Acts 15), he would have mentioned it. Paul therefore wrote Galatians sometime after evangelizing the area (AD 47) and the Jerusalem Council (AD 49), most likely in AD 48.

KEY VERSES – 2:15-16

“We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.”

KEY THEME:

Justification by Faith Alone

The doctrine of “Justification by Faith Alone” was one of the rallying cries of the Reformation. It has been called the hinge on which Christianity turns, and the doctrine by which the Church stands or falls. Justification is an act of God’s free grace in which he pardons us of all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only because of the righteousness of Christ that has been given to us and received by faith alone.

“The Galatian Heresy” which Paul fought against was the notion that one must perform the ‘works of the law’ in order to be justified before God. The Judaizers wanted to force Gentiles to live like Jews (2:14). In context, this meant embracing the identity markers of the Jews: circumcision, food laws, the keeping of religious holy days. They taught that faith in Jesus is necessary, but not enough. It may be pictured like this:

Galatian Heresy: Faith in Christ + Works (self-effort) = Justification / Salvation

The True Gospel: Faith in Christ alone = Justification / Salvation + Good Works (Fruit of the Spirit)

KEY DOCTRINES

- ***Justification by Faith Alone.*** God accepts us on the basis of what Christ did for us alone (his perfect life and sacrificial death) and not by our performance. We cannot add our works to this without losing the Gospel because to rely on keeping the law rather than on Christ always brings a curse (1:10). The Jews themselves do not keep the law (6:13), yet try to force others to do so (2:14).
- ***Paul's Apostolic Authority.*** Paul used to persecute believers, but “is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy” (1:23). Hand-picked by Christ to take the Gospel message to the Gentile world (see Acts 9), he didn't receive the Gospel from others but directly via revelation from Jesus Christ (1:1, 12). Paul's authority was affirmed even by Peter & John the Apostles (2:7-9). Thus, his writings are authoritative having the stamp of apostleship.
- ***The Freedom of Christians.*** Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. Since he gives us his perfect righteousness, we don't have to run on the performance treadmill (either Jewish laws or our own moral laws) in order for God to accept us. “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (5:1).
- ***Walking by the Spirit.*** Christ has liberated us from the yoke of slavery (the curse of the law) and from our own enslavement to sin. Therefore, we can walk by his Spirit who is producing in us a harvest of righteousness (called ‘The Fruit of the Spirit’ – 5:22-24) which the Mosaic law aimed for all along (5:14, 23c). We are empowered by the Spirit ‘to fulfill the law of Christ’ (6:2), the kind of godly life the Mosaic law pointed to but was unable to empower people to do.
- ***Adoption into God's Family Promised to Abraham.*** When one places his trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, he becomes a part of the family of Abraham (3:27-29) along with all those who “live by faith” (3:11). “Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham (3:7). We have received adoption, and God has sent his Spirit into our hearts, crying out, “Abba! Father!”

KEY QUESTION

Does Paul's insistence that justification by faith alone contradict what James teaches elsewhere, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24)? At first glance, it may appear so, but remember: always look at the context!

Paul (in Galatians & Romans) is addressing a specific problem, namely, those who want to be justified before God by their performance. He teaches that our relationship with God is only on the basis of faith alone in Christ alone without smuggling good works into the equation. In other words, Faith in Jesus + Nothing = Salvation. But, as the Reformers would say, “We are saved by faith alone, but never by a faith that is alone.” In other words, true saving faith always produces effects. There is always Spirit-produced fruit (Gal. 5:22-23). Believers are now “a new creation” (6:15) who walk according to the Spirit (5:25).

James is addressing a different problem. People were claiming to have true faith, but no evidence of it anywhere in their lives. In other words, their faith changed nothing about their lives. How can you ‘see’ faith other than by its fruits? You cannot. Thus, James is arguing that “faith apart from works is useless” (James 2:20). It is nothing more than dead faith (2:17). In reality, dead faith cannot save anyone: “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead” (2:26). Therefore, works ‘justify’ our claim to have true saving faith.

THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF GALATIANS

For everyone, Paul clearly lays out that salvation is a free gift of God that we cannot earn by good works (2:16). To attempt to bribe God by our moral efforts is to remain under a curse (3:10). But Christ redeems us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (2:13), namely when he died by crucifixion. For Christians, we know that we are saved by grace, but we don't always know what it means to live by grace (5:13-6:10), and so we are constantly tempted to fall back upon our own efforts and self-righteousness (3:1-5)

AN OUTLINE OF GALATIANS¹

I. The Gospel of Grace Defended (chapters 1-2)

A. Introduction (1:1-9)

1. Salutation: The ground of Grace (1:1-5)
2. Situation: The departure from Grace (1:6-9)

B. The Gospel of Grace is Given by Divine Revelation (1:10-24)

C. The Gospel of Grace is Approved by Jerusalem Leadership (2:1-10)

D. The Gospel of Grace is Vindicated by Peter's Hypocrisy (2:11-21)

II. The Gospel of Grace Explained (chapters 3-4)

A. The Holy Spirit is Given by Faith, not by Works (3:1-5)

B. Father Abraham was Justified by Faith, not by Works (3:6-9)

C. Justification is by Faith, not by Works (3:10-4:11)

D. Blessings are Received by Faith, not by Works (4:12-20)

E. Law & Grace Do Not Mix (4:21-31)

III. The Gospel of Grace Applied (chapters 5-6)

A. Our Position of Liberty: "Stand Fast" (5:1-12)

B. Our Practice of Liberty: "Love One Another" (5:13-15)

C. Our Power for Liberty: "Walk in the Spirit" (5:16-26)

D. Our Performance in Liberty: "Let Us Do Good To Everyone" (6:1-10)

E. Conclusion (6:11-18)

¹ Adapted from *Nelson's Book of Bible Maps & Charts*, pp. 402-402