

GALATIANS—WEEK 4

RESPECTING THE WHOLE LAW



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Galatians, Week 4 — Respecting the Whole Law
The Cover Picture is Peter and Paul by El Greco (1541–1614)
It depicts the confrontation described in Galatians 2:11.

Despite Paul’s anger at the legalists who advocate circumcision, Paul’s deep respect for the law comes out in this passage. His argument against them gets even more hostile here. But, at the same time, the sense that the law isn’t just about the rules comes out.

So, the law is good and Christians, in loving one another, are actually fulfilling the whole law.

We’re pleased to provide *the DEEP* studies in PDF format at no charge. We hope you will find them helpful and encouraging as you press on in your journey toward spiritual maturity in the Lord.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. To subscribe to the daily DEEP email, visit our website at www.ailbe.org and click the sign-up button at the bottom.

There, you will also discover many other resources, including many email newsletters, such as our worldview study *ReVision*, our devotional newsletter *Crosfigell*, and *the DEEP*.

We are a spiritual fellowship patterned after the Celtic Revival. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

T. M. Moore, Principal
tmmoore@ailbe.org

Thank you.

All the individual weekly study guides are available for download here:

<https://www.ailbe.org/resources/itemlist/category/91-deep-studies>

Galatians, Week 4 — Respecting the Whole Law
Copyright 2022 F. Michael Slay
The Fellowship of Ailbe
www.ailbe.org

Except as indicated, Scripture taken from the New King James Version. © Copyright 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV stands for the English Standard Version. © Copyright 2001 by Crossway. Used by permission. All rights reserved. NIV stands for The Holy Bible, New International Version®. © Copyright 1973 by International Bible Society. Used by permission. All rights reserved. KJV stands for the King James Version.

1 Galatians 4:17–20 (ESV)

They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you! I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

The root Greek word that's translated as "make much of" (ζηλόω, zay-la-oh) means covet, desire, have deep concern for, be zealous for. That can be both good and bad.

Here it's bad, and worse, the second sentence is a purpose construction. They zaylaoh you, but it's just an act. They really want to shut you out. The Greek work for shut out (ἐκκλείσαι, ekk-lei-sai) just means exclude. They want to zaylaoh you [for the purpose] that you'll zaylaoh them.

Paul goes on to say that zaylaoh is always good when it's for a good purpose. That holds even when Paul can't be there.

Then Paul piggybacks on the zaylaoh concept to wear his heart on his sleeve. He sees the Galatians as vulnerable newborns who have not had *Christ* fully formed in them yet. He even describes his heartache as *the anguish of childbirth*. That's pretty over the top, so Paul says, "*I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.*"

The word translated as perplexed (ἀπορούμαι, apo-rou-mai) means uncertain, perplexed, worried. Paul's apologizing for his fraught tone. He wishes he could be with these folks he loves so he could chat with them directly and figure out exactly what's going on.

That should calm his nerves.

This passage implies something important to the modern practice of Christianity—it's okay to worry about the spiritual battles. In fact, that can be a good thing, even the key to success.

"I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go." — Abraham Lincoln

People all too often will say something like, "You just need to have more faith," in response to someone's anguish. Today's passage shows how that advice can be way off. While everyone can always use more faith, Paul's anguish here was appropriate, even righteous.

And there's another takeaway from this passage. We're supposed to be ready to suffer for Christ. When we think about how we might suffer, we might think of persecution or even torture. The kind of suffering described in this passage doesn't often come to mind.

But it should. Laying your heart on the altar is one of the sacrifices Christians are called to make.

Anyone with unsaved children can tell you all about that.

2 Galatians 4:21–26 (ESV)

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.

Take a step back from the details of this passage and something amazing emerges. By “*the law*” Paul doesn’t just mean the rules in the Torah; he means the whole Torah. This is typical; see Romans 3:21.

So then, what does it mean to follow the law? What does it mean to “*be under the law?*” What does it mean to “*listen to the law?*”

The Torah’s teaching isn’t just in the rules. The whole Torah teaches us who God is and who we are and how we got here. Many of those lessons are the kind of “*law*” that still applies today. The ceremonial law that Christ satisfied is in the rules. The rest is timeless wisdom.

Okay, so what’s Paul’s point here?

The root of the Greek word translated as *interpreted allegorically* (ἀλληγορέω, al-ay-gor-eh-oh) is where we get the English word allegory from, but back then its meaning was more like to make an analogy.

Paul’s point is that Hagar is analogous to *Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery*. Hagar *corresponds to the present Jerusalem*—the slavery of the law—*for she is in slavery with her children*.

Conversely, *the son of the free woman was born through promise*, and let us not forget that this was the promise that Abraham believed and it was credited to him as righteousness. It’s the foundation of Paul’s whole faith argument. By analogy, Paul says, “*But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.*”

We’re the children of faith and thus the children of the promise.

We do well to study the law (the whole Torah), even though Christ fulfilled and revoked the ceremonial rules. Even the rules He revoked are worth studying. In them, there is much to learn about God’s attitude towards the ones He created in His own image. This even holds for the whole Old Testament.

One of the great things about those “read the Bible in one-year” programs is that you discover how much of the Bible is in the Old Testament. Most of the DEEPs are written about the Old Testament because that’s where the vast majority of scripture is found—more than two-thirds.

That said, I find the pace of those one-year programs too much for thorough study. One trick I’ve found is listening to the audio NIV on CD. It’s very well produced and downright thrilling at times.

Somehow that’s easier for me to concentrate on.

3 Galatians 4:27–31

For it is written:

*“Rejoice, O barren,
You who do not bear!
Break forth and shout,
You who are not in labor!
For the desolate has many more children
Than she who has a husband.”*

Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.” So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.

Here, Paul wraps up his Hagar-Sarah analogy with a quote from Isaiah 54:1 that describes Sarah’s ultimate triumph and joy. Then he emphasizes Sarah’s supremacy over Hagar.

Do not miss how insulting this is. To a first century Jew, being described as analogous to Hagar is the ultimate put-down. The descendants of Hagar are at war with the descendants of Sarah even now, twenty centuries after this was written. Their animosity was even fresher back then.

Paul is calling the circumcision party the exact opposite of sons of the covenant. The insult climaxes with, *“Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.”*

Ouch.

Paul, as God’s messenger to the Gentiles, is forever making the point that Gentiles can be full members of the covenant, equal to Jews in righteousness and holiness. But today’s passage hints at putting Gentile Christians not just equal, but above the Jewish Christians who are of the circumcision party.

Paul is as mad as a cat in a bathtub. His love for the Galatians is palpable, and his anger over what the Judaizers have done is even more so.

But just consider how this transpired. Paul goes on a very successful missionary trip (presumably his first, according to the “southern” theory of who are the Galatians). He forms a tight bond with the newborn Christians in the churches he plants. They even take great care of him in his infirmities. He loves them.

Then some guy shows up (maybe more than one) with an extreme works-based doctrine and wrecks the whole thing. Paul’s great and joyful triumph is threatened. Paul’s work was clearly blessed by God, and this garbage is from the enemy. So Paul takes it personally.

I’d be hot too.

4 Galatians 5:1–6

Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.

Of all the questions anyone can ask about the Bible, or even about religion in general, none is more prominent than, “What does it take to be saved?” That question is asked dozens of times in the gospels, sometimes without even using the word “saved.”

“*Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?*” — Luke 18:18b

The flip-side is equally important—“What things must I not do, if I am to be a true Christian?” The best-known example of this is Matthew 7:21–23.

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’ ”

I like to call Matthew 7:23 the scariest verse in the Bible because it’s not easy to see what these “practicers of lawlessness” did wrong. How come Jesus *never knew* them, and what can we do to assure that He knows us? “How to make sure Jesus knows me,” would be an interesting Sunday School topic.

Today’s passage is another key flip-side reference. Paul is undoubtedly saying here that if you buy into the circumcision doctrine, *Christ will profit you nothing. You have become estranged from Christ.*

“*Estranged*” parallels “*I never knew you*” perfectly. That’s fatal.

My go-to verse on the topic of how to be saved is Romans 10:9—*that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.*

This allows for a lot of error without jeopardizing one’s salvation. I like that because unity in the body is key. While I strongly advocate reformed theology, other views aren’t fatal. We need to keep this front and center when debating doctrine. Better doctrine is useful in significant ways, but it’s not unto salvation.

But today’s passage does show an error that is critical—a fatal error. But what’s so different this time?

Circumcision strikes at the heart of the covenant. It was the official sign of the covenant. You cannot receive salvation by grace through faith while looking to a work of the flesh for covenant inclusion.

That’s signing up with the old covenant, effectively renouncing the new.

5 Galatians 5:7–15 (ESV)

You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

Back in the glory days of NBC’s Saturday Night Live, they parodied a commercial where a diamond cutter makes a crucial cut in the back seat of a Lincoln riding on a rough road. He inspects the result and pronounces it, “Perfect!”

The SNL parody showed a rabbi circumcising a child in the back seat of a Lincoln. “Perfect!”

I wonder if they had verse 12 in mind when they thought that one up. Paul’s pique with the Judaizers is so great that he wishes for a catastrophic slip of the knife.

Paul also seems to be defending himself against the claim that he advocated circumcision. (He stopped that long ago.) Apparently, the Judaizers used Paul as a reference for their doctrine. Paul refutes that simply with, “*But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted?*”

But the real meat in this passage is in the second paragraph. Freedom in Christ is not freedom to party. *Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.*

Then Paul says something seemingly contradictory, “*For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*”

Who cares about fulfilling the whole law? Isn’t Paul’s point that we’re no longer slaves to the law?

This gets to a point that’s crucial for Christians to understand—the law is still good. *So, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.* — Romans 7:12 (ESV)

Even though we’re not slaves to the law, it deserves our respect. *But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.*

A dog-eat-dog system is worse for everyone.

Many ways of living, and many systems of government, simply do not work. Many recent experiments in government have turned into brutal dictatorships, often spawning genuine humanitarian crises.

Systems that don’t recognize, and design for, fallen human nature will invariably fall into corruption.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What have you been anguished over?

2. What Bible reading programs do you like?

3. Have you ever seen opposition to the gospel?

4. What separates a serious error from a minor one?

5. What's your favorite law? Least favorite?

Items for prayer: