

Galatians 2:17-21
(ESV)

17 But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!
18 For if I rebuild what I tore down, 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. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

**Legalism, Liberalism, and God's Grace:
How the Gospel Conquers Sin**
Galatians 2:17-21

Main thought: Grace is a better antidote to sin than law.

It seems counterintuitive to claim that grace is a better antidote to sin than law for our natural tendency is to create more law in a vain attempt to curb sin. Because those whom we govern do not have the heart or intent of law in them we create more law in futile efforts to make people moral. Our efforts *may* serve to produce a more superficially moral society but they do little to produce any internal morality. Law affects behavior by threatening punishment, and it exerts control through the casting fear. Law cannot, however, change the heart of a person and make them truly moral.

Paul, in dealing with the Judaizers in the churches of Galatia deals with the heart of law and grace and demonstrates the superiority of grace over the law as the way to righteousness.

In verse 17, Paul addresses and objection of his opponents: “How can we Jews who are partakers of the covenant and recipients of the law be sinners like the Gentiles who have none of these benefits? Does this not make Christ a minister of sin?” “Absolutely not!” is the reply. Jesus did not alter the nature of the law nor diminish its capacity in any way. Paul will point out the fundamental weakness of the law as a means to justification: *the law cannot produce what it commands* (Gal. 3:21; Rom. 8:3&4).

The deficiency of the law lies in its inability to transform the human heart. This does not mean that the law does not consider the heart nor command the heart. We are commanded to love God with all our heart, soul, and might (Deut. 6:5; 10:12) and to circumcise our hearts (Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4), yet these commands are powerless to produce the intended effect. The law, therefore, contains blessings and cursings (Deut. 27 & 28) as motivation for observing the command. The sinful heart, however, will not readily

receive the law and will therefore fail to connect the commandment with life.

Consider, for example, the safety laws that govern highway driving. The intent of such laws is to preserve life (a good and moral motivation), and we can fairly assume that most people share the desire to preserve life. Nevertheless, most of us violate the most basic safety regulations on a daily basis because we do not see the connection between the regulation and life. The regulation stands as an interference to our most pressing goal: to get to work/school on time, to make an appointment, etc. We think little at the moment of the lives of construction workers and fellow drivers, their families, the potential disaster that awaits, or the fines and imprisonment threatened. In the heat of the moment our minds are fixed on the more immediate goal: don't be late.

It is the same with sin living within us. When lust seizes our hearts we think not of the consequences to our families or to the objects of our lust and we think even less of the consequences to our own hearts. We are filled with hunger for the object of our desire and we are overcome by sin: "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death" (James 1:14 & 15). In the moment of temptation we do not connect sin with death; we fail to comprehend that the object of our passion is the instrument of our demise.

Legalism is dangerous because it gives a false sense of righteousness. It is an attempt at self-justification that produces nothing but self-righteousness. When we believe that we have God's favor because we obey God's rules we are self-righteous legalists. Jesus rebuked the self-righteous Pharisees and law-teachers: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matthew 23:27-28). Note also the

parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14.

By promoting self-righteousness within us, legalism cuts us off from the grace which transforms the heart and frees the soul. We cannot defeat sin within ourselves by beating against it with the law, for the more we beat against it the more we fan its flame. See Romans 6 & 7.

Liberalism is dangerous because it gives a false sense of righteousness. Liberalism is merely another means of self-justification. Liberalism seeks justification by removing the commandment and thereby removing the threat of punishment. The problem here is a failure to recognize the righteousness of the law even though it cannot produce what it commands. Paul was not antinomian (against law); he was pro-grace in Jesus. See Rom. 7:7-12. This attempt at self-justification leads to the same hell as legalism.

Both legalism and liberalism are man's attempt at righteousness and neither result in the righteousness God requires because neither give life to the soul.

Grace, on the other hand, enlivens the heart and nourishes the soul and frees the sinner. The great objection to grace is that it will produce sin because it removes the threat of the law. Paul deals with these objections in Romans 5, 6, 7 and 8. Grace in Jesus does not give permission to sin; it kills sin by removing the condemnation of the law and setting the sinner in right standing before God. We are sinners and law-breakers for whom all the threats of the law produce fear and condemnation which far from motivating us not to sin imprison our hearts. Grace transforms our hearts and gives us what the law could not: the inward desire to do what the law commands. See Romans 8.

Paul states in Gal. 2:19-20: "For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I

now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” It is through my crucifixion with Christ that I find life and the power to walk with God. Justification in Jesus results in my forgiveness and the righteousness of Jesus imputed to me which sets me free from condemnation and gives me life.

God commanded the Israelites to circumcise their own hearts in Deuteronomy 10:16. The people were to love God and obey His commandments out of love and honor for God. Sin, however, kills the heart and drives us to the twin perversions of legalism and liberalism. We bow up against the commandment, loathe it’s words, and fail to love God.

In Deuteronomy 30:6 God promises, “And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.” Life in Jesus conquers sin within us.