

# ALTERING THE GOSPEL OF GOD'S GRACE LEADS TO CATASTROPHIC CONSEQUENCES

## Galatians 5:7-12

*Please review this week's catechism question.*

### INTRODUCTION

On February 1, 2003 the space shuttle Columbia was torn to shreds as it reentered Earth's atmosphere instantly killing all eight of the astronauts on board. In the lengthy investigation that followed, NASA discovered that a 1.5 pound piece of insulating foam from the tank of liquid fuel fell off during liftoff and punctured a hole in the right wing of the shuttle about the size of a piece of paper. So when the hot gases caused by the friction of the shuttle as it entered the atmosphere flowed into that small hole the interior structure of the wing melted and it fell apart sending the whole craft tumbling through the atmosphere being ripped apart by the enormous pressures. A very small defect in the structure of the shuttle led to the catastrophic destruction of the entire vehicle.

In vv. 7-12 Paul is setting forth the catastrophic consequences of altering the doctrine of justification. If you believe that your standing with God is determined or affected by what you do or don't do, no matter how small you might make your contribution, you will bring great harm to yourself, your family and your church. A very small error in what you believe about what it takes to gain eternal life will tear your life to shreds when you enter the presence of the God who is a consuming fire.

Give a brief summary of the doctrine of justification that Paul seeks to defend in this letter to the Galatians: *Every human being is guilty of breaking God's laws and has no ability to obey God's laws. All humans are rightly under God's condemnation and deserve to be punished forever in hell for our many sins. God has made a way for guilty sinners to be justified, that is, to be declared not guilty of their sins but perfectly righteous. He has made a way for guilty sinners to*

*be treated by him as if they had never sinned but always obeyed. That way is Jesus Christ. He obeyed all of God's law every moment of his life and he suffered death on the cross for everyone who trusts in him and not in his or her own goodness or performance or decisions or sincerity.*

### STUDY

1. Paul says that the Galatians were, at one time, living the Christian life, as it ought to be lived. Using Galatians 2:15-16, 20, 3:3-5, 4:15 & 5:5-6 what kinds of things did Paul observe in the Galatians that led him to believe they were Christians and living as Christians?

*By the work of the Spirit they believed the gospel and were filled with the hope of righteousness and began to serve one another through love. They did not depend upon their own efforts or their performance of any religious duties but trusted that they were made righteous by the perfect righteousness of Christ. Their lives were filled with joy and hope and love for others, including Paul. Thus they were running well the race that God called them into.*

2. What does it mean to "obey the truth"?

*It is significant that Paul says they have been hindered from "obeying the truth." He doesn't say they have been hindered from "believing the truth." The false teachers are saying that they must obey God by obeying the law. Paul says that by obeying the law they are disobeying the truth that God has called them to obey. How do you obey the truth of the gospel which says that you cannot obey any law to be made right with God but are made right by the obedience of Christ? Jesus was asked this exact question in John 6:28, the crowd asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus replied, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." The way you obey the truth is to believe in Christ as the one who obeyed God's law for you and suffered the death you deserve.*

3. If being persuaded that you must obey God's law to be accepted by God does not come from God, where does it come from? See 1 Timothy 4:1-4.

*The implication is that if you believe that God accepts you based on your sincerity, your performance of some moral or religious act, then you are following the teaching of Satan. God does not command you to obey his law in order to gain eternal life. That form of teaching is always demonically inspired as Paul says in 1 Timothy 4:1-4, "The Spirit clearly says that in the last times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars... They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth." Like every good counterfeiter, Satan is out to mix a lot of truth with a little bit of error so that you won't realize that you are not obeying the truth. Every false teacher and everyone who follows false teachers believe they are obeying God. But the only "obedience" that God is looking for is the obedience of not obeying but believing in the obedience of Christ.*

4. Are you obeying the truth of the gospel? How do you know?

**A small defect in the doctrine of justification will bring catastrophic consequences because any defection from the gospel of grace is disobedience to God.**

5. What is the main point of the metaphor in v. 9?

*A very small amount of yeast is added to bread dough which then affects the entire lump of dough. The small amount of yeast permeates the whole lump of dough causes the entire loaf to rise.*

6. What are some ways that the "small" error that we must obey the law in order to be justified, might affect your life and life of your church?

*If you believe that God's justifying you is based, at least in part upon what you do or don't do, then either you will become a proud, self-righteous person or you will become a very discouraged, disheartened person. You either will view yourself as having done what God requires and thus be proud of your accomplishments and contemptuous of those who don't live like you or you will view yourself as regularly failing to do what God requires and thus have no hope of ever pleasing God or of being justified. You will either be a critical, judgmental person or you will be a despondent, discouraged person who eventually gives up on religion. A church of people who believe it is their performance that gains them favor with God will either be judgmental, cold, and unsympathetic towards those who are struggling. Or it will be made up of lots of very sad and discouraged people who are ruled over by a few truly "godly people". Or it will be a complacent, self-satisfied collection of nice people and take on the characteristics of a social club. When a church abandons the man humbling, God exalting gospel of God's free grace in Christ, then it becomes either a social club or a harsh, condemning, abusive community.*

7. Have you seen how "small" error has adversely affected your life or a church?

**A small defect in the doctrine of justification will bring catastrophic consequences because small errors affect whole lives and churches.**

8. Why is Paul confident that the Galatians will ultimately agree with him and disagree with the false teachers? How can he be so confident?

*He is confident, not in them but in the Lord. He knows they will respond positively to his letter by rejecting the false teachers and embracing the truth he teaches because he knows that God is the one who saves people. He knows that God graciously overcomes all resistance to the truth by the Spirit and so sinners repent and believe. Paul knows that repentance and faith are both the work of God, not the work of man. This first sentence in v. 10 can only be spoken by a*

man who believes that God is in charge of who will be saved and not men. If the salvation of the Galatians depends upon their ability, their choice, then there is no way that Paul could ever say that he is confident that they will agree with him and not the false teachers.

9. How does knowing God is sovereign in salvation affect you?

10. What does Paul say will happen to the false teachers? Why will God treat false teachers in this way?

*They will bear God's judgment upon them for their false teaching. What Paul is expressing here is God's loyalty to his people. We are his bride. We are the sheep of his pasture. We are his children and heirs. As he says in Isaiah, "I have engraved you (plural, the church) on the palms of my hands." It is not surprising that he is angry with and determined to punish those who attack and seek to harm his church.*

11. How does that affect your desire to know doctrine?

**A small defect in the doctrine of justification will bring catastrophic consequences because God always troubles those who trouble his church.**

12. How could the false teachers be accusing Paul of preaching that being circumcised is necessary to be saved as v. 11 implies they are doing? See Acts 16:1-4 & 21:20-26 & 1 Cor. 9:19-23.

*This is a perfect example of taking statements out of context in order to make a point. Paul did not tell Jewish Christians to not circumcise their sons. He permitted those who were racially Jewish to observe the Jewish feast days. In fact, the book of Acts records Paul's having Timothy, whose mother was Jewish and thus he was considered Jewish circumcised so he wouldn't be kept out of Jewish synagogues as an apostate Jew. He himself performed Jewish ceremonies regarding vows, which included making sacrifices in the temple. He had Timothy circumcised and he fulfilled the vows so that he could be more effective in preaching the gospel, not because*

*he believed God required obedience to these laws. However, the false teachers, knowing his position, told the Galatians that Paul was two-faced. When he was with Jews he preached a gospel that included circumcision in order to get the Jews to like him but when he was with Gentiles he left out circumcision in order to get the Gentiles to like him.*

13. What is Paul's defense against this rumor?

*Paul refutes this rumor by simply asking why it was he was still being persecuted by the Jews if it was true that he was telling people they had to be circumcised and keep the law in order to please God. The Galatians would have known that this was the case because Paul was stoned and left for dead outside one of their cities due to Jewish persecution. Jewish people would have no trouble with preaching the gospel if that message included the command to be a good, law abiding Jew.*

14. What is it about the message of the cross of Christ that is offensive to human beings?

*The cross of Jesus leaves no room for human pride. The death of Christ on the cross shows that humans are helpless sinners. It communicates that there is nothing that any human can do to gain God's approval. We are thoroughly enslaved by sin and have no ability to free ourselves from its power or the judgment of God upon our sins. If we could justify ourselves or overcome our sins in some way then Christ would not have needed to die. The cross of Christ does not show that we are valuable as so many preach in our day. God giving his son for our sins does not show how valuable we are but how offensive we are to God. God cannot love us without our sins being placed upon Christ and Christ's righteousness being given to us. God does not love us because of us but because of Christ and what he did on that cross. Apart from Christ we are completely and utterly contemptible creatures. We have offended infinite kindness by taking all the gifts God has given and used them in the service of our own pleasures and passions. To trust in that cross means admitting that you are no better than the worst criminal you can imagine.*

*There is no difference before God between you and the BTK serial killer who was recently caught in Wichita, KS. To trust in that cross means admitting that God has no reason to save you other than the pleasure of his own will. God is not drawn to you by anything in you. You have never provoked his love but only his wrath. To trust in that cross means to confess that you deserve hell. To trust in that cross is to abandon all confidence in yourself and cast yourself upon the mercy of your judge. To trust in that cross is to declare that you care not what men think of you but only what God thinks of you. It is to willingly abase yourself and to exalt God as infinitely high above you.*

**15.** What does Paul imply about the motives of those who are preaching circumcision in v. 11?

*He is saying that the reason the false teachers say that you must obey the law to be saved is to avoid offending men and to gain the approval of men. They are driven by pride in themselves and by fear of what man might do or say. As long as you leave room for man to do something to merit God's approval, then you leave room for human pride and for humans to impress one another.*

**16.** Have you experienced the offensiveness of the cross? Have you not talked about the cross because of your fear of offending others?

**A small defect in the doctrine of justification will bring catastrophic consequences because defection from the gospel is driven by pride and fear.**

**17.** How is it right for the apostle of God's grace to utter such a harsh and cruel wish as that in v. 12? How can one who has been commanded to love his enemies and pray for those who persecute him speak with such cruel desire? Compare with 4:19-20 & Acts 20:28-31.

*First, Paul is reflecting the attitude of God and of his Christ towards his enemies. It is without question that God hates all who do wrong. He laughs at his enemies who speak as if they are going to overthrow*

*him. While God saves sinners yet he also is storing up wrath for all those whom he does not save and Paul is expressing that determination, just as the psalmists and the prophets in the OT and Jesus in the gospels with his "woes" does. Second, Paul is speaking as a shepherd of the flock of God. What other kind of language ought a shepherd to use about the wolves who are intent upon devouring the flock? What kind of shepherd would he be if he did not fiercely oppose those who would rob the sheep of eternal life? Again, this is exactly the same kind of language that Jesus used in his denunciation of the Jewish religious leaders. Good shepherds are fiercely opposed to those who would harm the flock.*

**18.** In light of Deuteronomy 23:1, what else is Paul implying about those who are preaching that circumcision is necessary to salvation?

*This language is the language of irony. The false teachers are saying that if the male Gentile Christians will have the foreskin of their genitalia cut away, then God will accept them into his presence. They are teaching that this circumcision will gain access to God. What Paul is implying by this strong statement is that rather than this cutting making them acceptable to God they are actually making themselves unacceptable. What he is referring to is Deuteronomy 23:1, which says, "No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the Lord." In other words, no castrated men were allowed to come near to God. They were defective and were thus excluded from the people of God as they drew near to worship God in the temple. Paul is saying that these men by teaching that human obedience to the Law makes you acceptable to God actually make themselves defective and thus unacceptable to God, according to the Law. They are shut out of the assembly, out of the church and will never enjoy that eternal fellowship that Christ has won.*

**19.** What are you doing to make sure you are not altering the gospel of God's grace in any way?

**A small defect in the doctrine of justification will bring catastrophic consequences because defective doctrine makes you defective.**