

Dear Friends,

We read a New Testament letter such as Galatians and would love to dismiss it as not applicable to us. We understand that Jesus is God; Moses is not. We are to follow Jesus, not Moses. Those Old Testament rules and rituals don't bother us. We'd never think of adopting them, much less insisting that our brothers and sisters adopt them as well. A good thought. However, what is our contemporary parallel? What tugs at our minds and hearts and urges us to add "A" or "B" to our faith in Jesus? For many believers in our day, what is most popular, especially with our favored group, tugs at us just as powerfully as the legalistic teachings that Paul teaches the Galatians to avoid tugged at them.

I love a cute story of a young promising pastor who was called to serve a strong notable church as its pastor. On his first Sunday, the young man preached on repentance. All the people agreed; it was one of the best sermons they'd ever heard on repentance. Next Sunday, he preached on repentance again. Still a good sermon, but they wondered why he preached two sermons on the same topic. When he preached again the third Sunday on repentance, the church elders paid their new pastor a visit. Why did he preach three consecutive sermons on repentance? Without hesitation, the young pastor gave them an answer they were not prepared to hear, "Yes, I preached my heart out on repentance that first Sunday. But during the week following, I saw no signs of repentance, none whatever. So I preached a second sermon on repentance. But, seeing still no

signs of repentance in the congregation, I felt compelled to preach yet the third time on it." Too many contemporary Christians think their faith only requires them to claim their faith with words. How they live their lives--that has nothing to do with their faith. No, it has everything to do with their faith, as we read in Jesus' own words.

A beloved hymn sings the prayer.

The dearest idol I have known;
what 'er that idol be,
Help me to tear it from its throne,
and worship only Thee.

Are we willing to put our own daily thinking and conduct under the New Testament light and abandon whatever fails to find its loving example in that teaching? That, my friends, is the message of Galatians to us. When I first studied Galatians many, many years ago, I pondered. How does this message apply to us? What can we learn from it? Over subsequent years, literally every time I've gone back to study Galatians, I find more instruction, and sometimes more rebuke, that both I and other believers need so much to learn and to practice. Lord help us to learn the Galatian lesson and grow our faith by it.

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

Galatians

My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you. (Galatians 4:19 KJV 1900)

For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love. (Galatians 5:6 KJV 1900)

Paul's intensity in Galatians rises to a near-all-time-high, as evidenced in the opening verses of the letter. By accepting the teaching of a hybrid "Moses-Jesus" gospel, the people who heard and believed Paul's preaching with great joy were now in danger of abandoning the life-transforming joy of their experience in the gospel that Paul preached to them. He seems bewildered at the idea that they would abandon something so joyful and life-transforming to embrace something so rigid and impossible. (Acts 15:10 KJV)

For an extended time, three friends and I, along with many of you, have studied Galatians in-depth. Naturally, as I pondered how to summarize Galatians, I asked them to cite one verse that best summarizes Galatians. The first response was two-fold. 1) That is a hard question. 2) Galatians 5:6. I agree with his choice of Galatians 5:6, but I also added Galatians 4:19.

As we review Paul's letter to the Galatians, we realize that many of the Galatians who first embraced the gospel under Paul's preaching had abandoned his teaching in favor of what he described as another Jesus and another gospel. (Galatians 1:6-10; 2 Corinthians 11:3-4 KJV) What

is the solution to this problem? The two verses above, I believe, point the way.

...*until Christ be formed in you.* This verse relates to the impact the gospel has on those who believe it and strive to live it, not to eternal salvation. In eternal salvation, first experienced by an individual in the new birth, we are formed (“created”) ***in Christ***. (Ephesians 2:10, 2 Corinthians 5:17 KJV) In the gospel, Christ is formed ***in us***, in our minds and values, above all, in our faith.

When Paul first preached to the Galatians, they turned from their pagan lifestyle to Jesus and the gospel. Jesus was formed in them as the “Author and Finisher” of their faith. Subsequently, some of them abandoned Paul’s teaching and embraced a hybrid Moses-Jesus gospel. They truly abandoned Christ in them, in their thinking and faith. First century or today, when a believer embraces a “Jesus plus” anything idea, they fall prey to the same ideas that derailed the Galatians from their godly faith. The gospel of New Testament teaching is not a Jesus plus gospel. When Christ is formed in us, in our thinking and our faith, we see Him as our all-in-all, not as 99% of our spiritual need. The Galatians added parts of the Mosaic Law to their faith, but Paul rejected that idea. Contemporary believers may add their own faith, their repentance and baptism, or any number of other ideas to Jesus. But the problem is the same. We should take note that the Galatians didn’t add some carry-over from their former paganism. They added something that was good, that came from God, but they misused it. God gave the law, but he gave it for a purpose that lasted from its giving till Jesus came. (Galatians 3:19 KJV) When the three disciples accompanied Jesus to the

Mount of Transfiguration, they did not hear a voice that said, “Hear Moses, hear Elijah, and hear my Son also.” The voice from heaven said, “*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; **hear ye him.***” (Matthew 17:5b KJV)

We see the Galatian problem in our day with frightening similarity to its first century form. Have you ever heard a very sincere believer quote Ephesians 2:8, “*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God,*” followed by their Jesus plus idea, “God supplies the grace, and you supply the faith in your salvation”? If this idea is the correct interpretation of this verse, why, in the next verse, did Paul include the emphatic, “...**and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God**”? Paul didn’t divide grace from faith as these folks do. He included both (Logically and grammatically) in his qualifier, “*not of yourselves.*” Salvation from the guilt of sins is not a cooperative work between God and us; it is, beginning to end, all of God. Our “Work” begins after new birth, our faith begins after new birth, not for salvation, but for the glory of our gracious God and Savior. ***Neither the grace nor the faith in our eternal salvation is ours.*** Most interpretations of Ephesians 2:8-10 ignore the plural pronouns, “ye,” in its various forms in the passage. Paul did not write of our personal salvation experience in this passage, but of God’s covenant provision for the salvation of all His people by His grace and by the “Good faith” of Jesus in His work for His people.

In Galatians 4:19, Paul very honestly identifies his heart-desire to see Jesus again taking shape in the Galatians’ minds and in their faith. With love, patience, and intense

labor, he compares his passion to restore them to a mother-to-be in child-birth pains.

For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love. For the Jesus plus gospel of Paul's Galatian critics, circumcision was an essential. (Galatians 6:12-13 KJV) The faithful gospel that Paul preached and taught the Galatians dismissed all those unnecessary and impossible ideas from the law. Only one truth—and one Person—matters. Jesus' example of selfless love at work in our lives, Jesus' form in us, shaping our thoughts and conduct. Error is always exposed and rejected by Scripture when we study Scripture and believe it. As Paul reminded the Galatians, (Galatians 5:3 KJV) circumcision didn't obligate people to keep one or two tenets of Moses' Law. It obligated them to keep it all! Neither the people who taught this idea to the Galatians nor the Galatians themselves were prepared to accept that logical necessity. They knew they couldn't keep the whole law. Apply this same Biblical principle to contemporary salvation-part-by-God-part-by-you teaching. If God requires your works for your salvation, how much does He require? If God requires your faith for your salvation, how much faith does He require? And the Bible answers, "You can't do enough, and you can't have enough faith."

For in Jesus Christ.... For Paul, the whole of this letter deals with children of God, already-born-again people. Paul was "in Jesus Christ." The Galatians were "in Jesus Christ." The dominant theme of his message to the Galatians—and to us—is about what matters "in Jesus Christ." What honors Him? What in our faith mirrors His teaching? Not circumcision, not our contemporary counterparts. One

controlling principle commands our minds. In the saved sphere of Jesus Christ, we need to add nothing to secure our salvation in Him. But, oh, we so need to cultivate Biblical ***“faith which worketh by love.”***

This verse truly captures the message of Galatians. Faith, New Testament faith that is anchored in Jesus, doesn't work by legalism. It doesn't work by circumcision. It doesn't work by “Jesus did His part; now you must do your part” for your salvation. Yes, faith does work. It works better than any other system of ideas or beliefs. But it only works rightly when we nurture it in the climate of selfless New Testament love. Love for God. Love for Jesus. And love for others. Biblical love has far more to do with how we act than with how we feel. Jesus emphasized that truth clearly.

If ye love me, keep my commandments. (John 14:15 KJV)

*As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: **continue ye in my love. If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love;** even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love.* (John 15:9-10 KJV)

Loving Jesus is not so much about how we feel as it is about how we choose to order our life. We abide or continue in His love only when we keep His commandments. Contemporary claims of Christianity flourish with folks who believe they are faithful Christians based solely on how they feel about Jesus and what they say, more about themselves than about Him. Look at the

way they conduct their life, their relationships, and their business affairs; you'll see little to nothing of the New Testament ethic of Jesus. If we claim Jesus, He requires that we live Him in every facet of our life, in every relationship.

...*faith which worketh by love*. Paul sets this principle as the right alternative to a hybrid faith of Jesus plus, and to a rigid legalistic disposition that eventually controls the life of all who choose the Jesus plus gospel. True New Testament faith doesn't work by an impossible set of rules. It doesn't work by rigid legalism. Nor does it work, even by a right belief alone. It works only when the conduct it prompts in us is carried out in actions and attitudes of love.

What is true New Testament love? Read—in fact, memorize—1 Corinthians 13:4-7. The first three verses in the chapter set the stage, but these verses highlight this principle of love as conduct over love as emotion. Every verb in these verses that Paul wrote to define Biblical love, “Charity,” is an **action verb**, not a feeling verb.

If we were to review the many violent and evil things done over the centuries in the name of Christianity, not a one of them would pass the filter of this verse. Ah, but forget about historical failures. Quietly reflect your personal conduct over the last week, month, or year. How much of your conduct would qualify? Thoughts? Words? Deeds? In my own personal reflections, I can recall sincere conduct that was driven by too much zeal or other factors. But failure to live up to the faith-working-by-love consistently prompts sincere regrets. We can each learn from those moments and grow more gracious in our faith, or we can repeat old failures and fail yet again. What shall it be? I want to grow closer to Him,

to be more like Him. My work is cut out for me, and the path is clear.

You say, "I can do pretty well with other believers, but those people who work with me would take advantage of me if I applied this attitude to my work with them." So? What did Jesus teach His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount? If you and I claim to be His disciples, this teaching applies to us no less than to them.

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. (Matthew 5:43-48 KJV)

Who is our personal model for our conduct? Jesus? Or the scribes and Pharisees whom He referenced in this lesson? Do we strive at speaking only truth and only with grace to our employer? About the political party or people whom we oppose? Or do we rationalize that we may lie to our employer or in our tax returns and think we did nothing wrong? That we can think with harsh angry words against those who disagree with our political ideas? How does this

conduct measure up to Jesus' words in this lesson? It doesn't, not at all. We can't alter what we've done. It is history. However, we can transform our future. We can be the light that Jesus taught us to be, but our light can only shine as brightly as our personal conduct. If we lie to our employer, we can't claim to be Jesus' light in a dark world. If we respond with anger and harsh words to folks who think differently about politics than we, we have no light. Our light can only shine when our voices, our hands, and our feet follow Jesus.

Faith working by love—and only by love—is a demanding lifestyle. We can all improve our faith-walk immensely. Remember. There is no situation in our life that does not require this teaching of Jesus. Let's begin with each other and work to expand it to every aspect of our lives. May I help you? May I serve you? I need your help and your prayers. I'd love to help you and to pray for you as well.

Elder Joe Holder