

Why Cling To The Rules? Galatians 4:21-31

It is an often repeated scene at Christian campgrounds throughout the summer months. A big bonfire is blazing, the Word is being preached, and the hearts of young people are being stirred to commit their lives to Christ and live lives that please Him. At the end of the message, students line up to grab a small twig and later throw it into the fire, representative of their lives being totally given over to Christ. On the lips of many of these students is the comment, "My life has not been what it should be, but it is going to be different from now on. I'm going to try harder." Unfortunately, the very same students repeat this scene the next year. The second time they come, the students make comments like, "I don't know what happened last year, but this year is going to be different. I am going to give even more effort to do what I know I'm supposed to do." Guess what happens the next year. You got it. The same ritual is repeated yet again.

Another time when we see people experience frustration is at New Years. People make resolutions as to how the next year is going to be different than the past one. People make plans for how they are going to try harder this time and not give up like they did before. What is the result? We fail again and again. We become so discouraged by our continual failure to keep resolutions that we stop making them. However, we still shudder at the thought of the frustration from having tried so hard only to fail time and time again.

When we think that pleasing God is a matter of clinching our teeth and trying harder and harder to live by a list of rules, two outcomes will result. Either we will grow disillusioned and discouraged wondering why we fail so miserably when we try so hard or we will become self-righteous and proud, deceiving ourselves into thinking our lives please God when in fact they do not.

The scenarios I have just mentioned are exactly like the problem Paul faced in the book of Galatians. Paul wrote to believers who wanted a hybrid religion. They trusted in Jesus to save them, but they wanted to add living under the law as the means for winning God's favor. They wanted to take Jesus with them, but they wanted to go back to a rules-keeping way of life. Paul asked his readers in Galatians 4:21- "Tell, me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?" The verses in the passage that follows are aimed at helping believers see that it is a big mistake to go back to living under the law. Why would we desire to cling to the rules when all they do is enslave us and keep us from God's blessing?

Galatians 4:21-31, at first glance sounds very strange to our ears. Paul's form of argument is very Jewish. Because we are not first century Jewish believers, we need to do a little more digging to understand what Paul is saying, but the original audience had no problem following what Paul said.

To help us get better oriented to the style of argument Paul uses; it is helpful for us to think of an example of literature we are familiar with in our culture today that uses the same style. John Bunyan's classic, *Pilgrim's Progress*, is a good example for us to consider. *Pilgrim's Progress* is the allegorical account of Christian's journey from his home in the City of Destruction to the Celestial city. His adventure is full of encounters with people with names like Faithful, Hopeful, and Ignorance. His travels take him through places such as Vanity Fair and the Valley of the Shadow of Death. This story contains people, places, and events that have symbolic, instructive meaning which Bunyan used to communicate rich lessons for our life's journey.

Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* uses a similar allegorical style to that which Paul employs in Galatians 4:21ff. The difference is that Paul allegorizes an Old Testament story about historical rather than fictitious characters as Bunyan did. In this passage, Paul gives symbolic meaning to two persons from Abraham's life, Hagar and Sarah, to illustrate a central, spiritual truth.

Central Truth: We are free to stop trying to live by the rule book that keeps us from receiving God's blessing

Wait! Haven't we heard this message before? Yes, this is the same thought Paul has been developing all the way through chapter four. He doesn't really add anything new. He just documents or illustrates it! A picture is worth a thousand words and the same is true for a word picture. A word picture or story that illustrates truth is just what is needed to bring what an author is communicating into focus and really help us get it. As Homer Kent writes, "An image sketched for the mind will usually remain long after a detailed argument has been forgotten."

Paul's Appeal: Are you really listening to what the law says? (4:21-23)

The law says that Abraham learned the hard way that you can't do it by the flesh!

What does the law teach us?

Abraham fathered two sons by two different women (4:22)

Abraham was 75 years old when God made a covenant promise to him. Abraham's wife Sarah was 65 at the time the covenant was made. A part of God's promise to Abraham was that he would have many physical descendants. He waited for 10 years. Still no son! Since the biological clock was ticking away, Sarah encouraged Abraham to take Hagar, her young Egyptian maidservant, so that she could bear him a son. Abraham agreed to this, and Ishmael was born. Fourteen years later, God kept His promise.

Sarah conceived and bore Isaac, the son of promise. At the time of Isaac's birth, Abraham was one hundred years old and Sarah was ninety.

Hagar and Sarah had very different birth stories!

Abraham produced Ishmael by Hagar, a slave woman, through an ordinary birth (4:23a)

Ishmael, Hagar's son, was born in the ordinary way. Literally, he was born according to the flesh. He was the result of human planning and effort, and not the result of God's promise. Instead of trusting God to give him children through Sarah in fulfillment of His promise, Abraham decided to help God out. You could say that Ishmael was born as the result of faith plus works. Abraham believed God would give him a son, but he also thought he had to do something to obtain God's blessing. Abraham learned an important lesson (and we need to learn the same lesson)—We don't obtain God's blessings by trying to help God out through our efforts. When we, like Abraham, try to help God out instead of trusting Him, when we don't wait on Him to work out His plan in His time, things get worse, not better. We find ourselves in a mess rather than in a place of enjoying God's blessings.

Abraham produced Isaac by Sarah, a free woman, through a supernatural birth (4:23 b)

Isaac, Sarah's son, came into the world by God's promise. If it were left to the effort of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac's conception would have been humanly impossible. Sarah was barren and well beyond childbearing years. However, when they trusted God to fulfill His promise, she conceived Isaac.

Here are the facts of the story Paul shares in brief:

From one father: Abraham

Through two mothers: Hagar and Sarah

Came two sons:

One son born the ordinary way when Abraham tries to help God out.

One son born by God's supernatural work when Abraham trusts God to do what He promised

Paul's Allegory (4:24-27)

After laying out the historical account of how Abraham's two sons came into the world by Hagar and Sarah, Paul allegorizes the story. Paul looks back at the historical persons involved and draws spiritual applications from their lives.

What do we learn from the example of Hagar and Sarah?

Hagar and Sarah represent two covenants, two cities, and two lessons to be learned

What do we learn from Hagar?

Covenant #1- Hagar represents the slave-bearing covenant of law (4:24b)

The historical person, Hagar, and the account surrounding the birth of her son, Ishmael, are regarded by Paul to be a Biblical type. A type is a historical person or an account designed by God to illustrate a principle or truth of Scripture. Hagar and the account of Ishmael's birth together are a type used by God to illustrate what our clinging to the rules produces in our lives.

As a slave woman, there was only one kind of offspring that Hagar could reproduce, a slave child. Hagar's status as a slave affected the status of her children. Slavery comes from slavery. Likewise, there is only one kind of "child" that the law can reproduce—slave children. When people place themselves under law, trying to please God by keeping the rules, they will find themselves in bondage. The law is completely incapable of giving us freedom. All the law is capable of doing is enslaving us by making demands of us we can never meet.

City #1-Hagar represents Jerusalem—the city of rules keepers—which produces slave children (4:25)

Hagar not only represented the law in Paul's allegory, but also Mount Sinai in Arabia which corresponds to first century Jerusalem. The reference to Mount Sinai points back to the place where the law was given to Moses. Jerusalem represents the headquarters of Judaism. There, we come across Jewish people trying to be acceptable to God by their own effort. We find people trying to please God through observance of sacrifices centered in the temple, through circumcision, through elaborate ceremony or tradition, and through conformity to the Mosaic Law. In first century Jerusalem, we find the status of people that rules keeping and giving one's best effort produce—people in slavery and bondage.

So, what do we learn from Hagar?

Hagar teaches us that:

Lesson #1-THOSE BORN TO KEEP THE RULES ARE SLAVES

What do we learn from Sarah?

City #2-Sarah represents the Jerusalem above—the free city—which produces free children (4:26a)

Sarah corresponds to the Jerusalem above—the city of the living God. By faith, Abraham looked forward to this city (see Hebrews 11:10, 16). While there are future aspects of this city that have not yet been realized (Revelation 21:2), many of the spiritual blessings associated with this place are enjoyed by believers here and now. Paul tells us in Ephesians that spiritually we are already with Christ in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 2:6). Already, we are able to experience the freedom that is given to those who belong to the heavenly Jerusalem—freedom from the shackles of the law that used to enslave us and keep us under condemnation. Our freedom is the result of God’s promise. It comes when we trust Christ to deliver us, in contrast to trying to keep the rules and please God by what we do.

Covenant #2-Sarah represents the freedom-bearing covenant of promise (26b)

Though Paul does not directly state that Sarah represents the Abrahamic Covenant of promise, it is implied by his earlier statement that the two women represent two covenants. Just as Hagar was a type used to illustrate the law and what it produces, Sarah is a type of promise and what trusting God produces.

As a free woman, Sarah’s children are also free. Sarah’s status affects the status of her son. Freedom produces freedom. Spiritually, we are Sarah’s children and she is our mother. Because a free woman is our mother, we are free.

So what do we learn from Sarah?

Sarah teaches us that:

Lesson #2-THOSE BORN BY FAITH IN CHRIST ARE FREE

Greater fruitfulness will be enjoyed by Sarah than Hagar (4:27)

In verse 27, Paul quotes a passage from Isaiah 54:1. In the context of Isaiah, the prophet predicts the future salvation and blessing Israel will experience based on the death and resurrection of the Suffering Servant, who is Christ. At the time of Isaiah’s prophecy, Israel was like the barren woman. She was under Babylonian Captivity and in a state of mourning because she was not experiencing the blessing of God. Isaiah encouraged the Jewish exiles to sing and shout for joy in response to the prediction of great fruitfulness in their future. This promise will be fulfilled during the millennial reign of Christ. During that future time, Israel, which appears barren now, will experience great blessing and fruitfulness in fulfillment of God’s promise.

Paul uses the verse from Isaiah to speak of Sarah’s situation. Though she appeared barren and unfruitful, there would come a time when she would experience greater fruitfulness than Hagar. In fulfillment of what Paul told the Galatians, Sarah’s fruitfulness has in fact been great.

Sarah's great fruitfulness relates not only to the numerous physical descendants she had through Isaac, but also to the numerous spiritual descendants she has of those who have followed her example of trusting God.

We can sum up Paul's allegory like this:

Abraham had two sons by two mothers
The two mothers represent two covenants—law and promise
One is related to earthly Jerusalem and the other to a higher, heavenly Jerusalem
One produces bondage; the other freedom

Paul's Application (4:28-4:31)

People who trust Christ are children of promise (4:28)

Believers become a part of Abraham's seed by faith in Christ (Galatians 3:29). We are not only spiritually related to Abraham, but also to Sarah, our spiritual mother and to Isaac who like us was born by God's promise.

How are believers like Isaac? Like Isaac, our spiritual conception was supernatural, our birth was a miracle, and we are the children of God's promise to Abraham, fulfilled in Christ. Just as Isaac's birth came about not because of human effort, but because of the promise of God, our spiritual birth came about because of God's promise. Abraham and Sarah received the promise of God when they trusted Him. Likewise, our spiritual birth was also God's doing which we received by trusting Christ.

Because we, as children of promise, owe our spiritual lives not to what we did, but to the incredible power of God, why would we want to still cling to the rules as if we have to do it ourselves? We need to remember how we were born. We were born by trusting in Christ. We should continue to live a life of trust in Him to produce His life in us.

People empowered by the Spirit will be persecuted by people empowered by their own efforts (4:29)

Paul's application in Galatians 4:29 comes from Genesis 21:9-10. Ishmael made fun of Isaac at the celebration of his being weaned. The son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. The same thing was happening in Paul's day. Those whose lives were the product of the flesh or self-effort, the Judaizers, were persecuting those whose lives were the product of the Spirit's power. The same is true today.

Those who try to please God by their own performance of the rules persecute those who trust the Spirit's power to produce a Christ-like life in them. People who trust themselves don't get along with those who trust God.

Faith is threatening and brings rebuke to those who keep trying to do something to earn God's acceptance and know they come up short. People who try to please God on their own live by a list of rules that pushes them to keep working, keep trying, keep doing.

The end result of rules keeping efforts, no matter how diligent those efforts might be, is always failure, bondage, condemnation, and frustration from the feeling of never making it. Those who experience the fruit of rules keeping don't appreciate those around them who are experiencing the results of the Spirit's work in the lives of those who trust Him. Rules keepers resent that we have what they are striving after, but are never able to obtain.

Don't be shocked by the fact when the greatest persecution you face comes from religious people. Don't be confused into thinking that you might have it wrong when the chief antagonists who give you the hardest time are religious, church-going people.

We can't cling to a rulebook and live by faith at the same time if we expect to receive God's blessing (4:30)

Our list of rules and faith can't exist together; the list has to go. When Sarah observed Ishmael mocking Isaac, she asked that Abraham get rid of both Hagar and Ishmael. There was no way that Ishmael was going to share in the inheritance with her son Isaac! There was a deep concern on Sarah's part that Ishmael might steal part of the inheritance due to her freeborn son. Only trouble would be in store if the slave son and the free son continued together. Because of the unending strife that would have occurred if Hagar and Ishmael stayed around, they had to go.

Likewise, in our lives, a rules-keeping system and a life of faith cannot both dwell in us at the same time. The two cannot co-exist without problems. The list of rules has to go! If we do not throw our rulebook away, but allow it to co-exist with our faith, we will miss out on the blessings of God. **We're not talking about throwing away the Old Testament!** We're talking about our legalistic rulebook that we use to evaluate our performance. We'll never earn God's blessing by living by the rules! That didn't even work for Abraham! God's blessing is based on our trust in His promise.

We are not slave-children; we are children of freedom (4:31)

Paul reminds the Galatians of who their mother is not and who she is. Their mother is not Hagar, the slave woman, but Sarah, the free woman. They were not children of slavery anymore, but children of freedom. Because they were free, it was absurd that they wanted to cling to living under the law. The same is the case today. Since we are free, it would be absurd for us to allow ourselves to be placed under the enslaving concept of trying to please God by our own efforts to keep the rules.

What lessons does God want us to learn from this illustration?:

- 1. Let's stop clinging to a list of rules; it will only keep us from experiencing God's blessing**
- 2. Let's enjoy the freedom that comes from trusting God to live His life through us**
- 3. We are children of freedom and ought to live like it; we aren't slave children anymore.**

Who is our mother? Hagar or Sarah? Are we living a life that is the product of the flesh? Is our life the product of our best efforts to please God by checking off our list of rules? Or, are we living a life that is the product of the Spirit's power? Are we trusting Him to produce a Christ-like life in us?

When the struggle of what you think about attacks, trust the Spirit to help you think God's thoughts. Don't pick up your list of rules. Trying to live by the rule, "Don't think that" will not help us to be pure in our thoughts.

When you are struggling with finances and tempted to "borrow" from the work place, trust the Spirit to help wait on the Lord's provision. Don't get out the list of rules. Trying our best to live by the rule, "Don't steal" will not keep us from taking stuff from our work place.

When you struggle to love someone in your life who is difficult, trust the Spirit to help you demonstrate the love of Christ. Don't grab your list of rules. Gritting your teeth and doing our best to live by the rule, "Love your neighbor as yourself" will not help us to love as we should. It's the Spirit of God who gives us the ability to love one another, as we trust Him to do His work in our lives.

How do we respond when our neighbor does things that really bothers us? You know, the kinds of things like forgetting to put the trash can lid on, causing trash to scatter all over our yards. When this kind of thing happens week after week, we struggle to respond in a gentle, loving way. We get mad and speak our minds to our neighbors only to feel ashamed later for acting in an unloving way.

We ask ourselves, "How will things be different next time?" Then we rehearse how we are going to do better. We envision ourselves picking up paper with a smile, giving a friendly greeting, and rehearsing in our mind "Love your neighbor as yourself, love your neighbor as yourself."

Sure enough, the very next week, there is trash all over our yard. Not only that, but we find that the neighbor's kids have broken our garage window. Suddenly, we find ourselves blowing up and letting the neighborhood know how mad we are. When the dust settles, we feel shame at how miserably we have failed to express love.

What happened? We can't love, as God would have us to love, by clinging to our little list of rules. Even when we rehearse the rules over and over again, they can't help us respond in a godly way. The only way that we can consistently express love to others is to trust the Spirit of God to produce this Christ-like quality in us. The next time our neighbor really ticks us off, instead of rehearsing the rules, we need to pray to God and trust Him to help us give the right response. Trying to live by the rules and do better next time can't help us be what God wants us to be. Instead of clinging to a system of rules, trust God to help you live a life that pleases Him.