

The Message of Galatians

by G. Campbell Morgan

The Galatian letter emphasizes the importance of faith in Christ as the sole condition of salvation, warning against the dangers of adding to faith with rites or ceremonies.

Scripture: Galatians 1:6

Topics: "Christian Liberty", "Faith"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes the core message of Galatians, which centers on the proclamation of life through faith, the law of the Spirit, and the fruit of love. He warns against the dangers of adding any rites or ceremonies to faith as necessary for salvation, which leads to a severance from Christ and a fall from grace. Morgan passionately argues that true liberty in Christ is not a license to sin but a constraint by the Spirit that enables obedience and produces love. He calls for a return to the foundational truths of the Gospel, highlighting that faith alone is sufficient for salvation. The sermon serves as a strong protest against any teachings that distort the essence of the Gospel.

Transcript

A. THE PERMANENT VALUES

I. The Central Teaching. A Proclamation

i. Life. The Root. The Supply of the Spirit. iii. 5.

a. The Way of Life is Faith.

b. Nothing else necessary to Salvation.

c. To add is to deny Faith and to destroy Life.

ii. Law. The Culture. The Lust of die Spirit. v. 17.

a. Liberty is not Licence.

b. It is Capture and Constraint by the Spirit.

c. Ability to obey.

iii. Love. The Fruit. The Triumph of the Spirit. v. 22.

a. The Mastery of Love. Fruit.

b. The Mastery of Selfishness impossible. Works.

c. Results.

Works issue from Ritualism.

Fruit results from Life.

II. The Abiding Appeal. A Protest

i. The Preachers of another Gospel. Accursed. i. 8,9.

Anathema. (Cf. 1 Cor. xvi. 22.)

That is the Condition. Suicide.

Let those loyal to the one Gospel agree.

ii. The Receivers of another Message. Severed from Christ. v. 4.

To trust in Ceremony is to deny Christ.

To deny Christ is to be severed from Christ.

To be severed from Christ is to fall from Grace.

iii. The Practicers of resulting Deeds. Excluded from Kingdom of God. v. 21.

The Works of the Flesh.

Sensual.

Spiritual.

Social.

Resulting from Lack of Life.

Resulting in Exclusion.

B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

I. To the Church

To superimpose on faith, any rite or ceremony or observance as necessary to salvation, is to sever from Christ; both in the case of the individual and the Church.

Those guilty of so doing are Anathema ; whether individuals, or councils, or churches.

II. To the World

The Way of Life.

Faith in Christ.

Any other Way is the Way of Death.

To believe in Him is to need no other; and to find deliverance from all bondage.

It is impossible to read this letter without being impressed by the severity of its note. It is evident that the writer was dealing with matters which, from his standpoint at least, were of vital importance. The letter is vibrant with passion, and yet consistent with principle. From the introductory sentences to the final words, it is quite evident that the apostle was profoundly moved; but it is equally evident that he never allowed emotion to carry him away from the line of a clearly defined system of thought and teaching. Whereas, as our analysis of the content reveals, personal matters largely enter into the letter, yet the supreme concern of the writer is for truth, and its bearing upon human life, in view of the perils which threaten men when truth is in any way violated or changed. There is an entirely different note running through this letter to that which characterized the Corinthian letters, This also is corrective; but as we turn over from the Corinthian letters we find a tone entirely different. Note the omissions from the salutation. Paul makes no reference to their standing in Christ. There is no single word of commendation. These two things mark this letter as peculiar from all others in the Pauline writings to the churches. The introduction is almost prosaic, "the churches in Galatia," not "them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called saints," and such rich phrases as mark the beginnings of other letters; no word of thankfulness for their state. After a few brief words of introduction, he commences, "I marvel," and immediately he proceeds to deal with them in terms of great severity.

Notice the specially declamatory passage of this letter in chapter one, and mark the severity of it;

"I marvel that ye are so quickly removing from Him that called you in the grace of Christ unto a different gospel; which is not another gospel: only there are some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach unto you any gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be anathema. As we have said before, so say I now again, If any man preacheth unto you any gospel other than that which ye received, let him be anathema."

Turn to another declamatory passage, in the third chapter, and again note the intense severity;

"O foolish Galatians, who did bewitch you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was openly set forth crucified! This only would I learn from you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are ye now perfected in the flesh? Did ye suffer so many things in vain? if it be indeed in vain, He therefore that supplieth to you the Spirit, and worketh miracles among you, doeth he it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?"

Turn over yet once more to chapter four, and the same severe note is found;

"Howbeit at that time, not knowing God, ye were in bondage to them which by nature are no gods: but now that ye have come to know God, or rather to be known of God, how turn ye back again to the weak and beggarly rudiments, whereunto ye desire to be in bondage over again? Ye observe days, and months, and seasons, and years. I am afraid of you, lest by any means I have bestowed labour upon you in vain."

Or take the one tender outburst of the letter:

"My little children, of whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you, yea, I could wish to be present with you now, and to change my voice; for I am perplexed about you."

This passage thrills with the pain of a troubled heart; concern fills the mind of the writer.

I lay emphasis at such length upon these matters in order that we may come with solemnity to the letter, in our attempt to discover its message. Evidently the matter of which the apostle wrote was, in his estimation, of supreme importance. He was not writing to people who had failed in behaviour. The peril was of the gravest; the foundations were threatened, and consequently the whole superstructure was in danger.

This letter has been called the Magna Charta of the early Church. It is the Manifesto of Christian liberty, explaining the nature of that liberty, applying the laws of that liberty, and cursing the enemies of that liberty. It is of perpetual value from that standpoint, and more than once in the history of the Christian Church this little pamphlet has sounded the clarion call of return to freedom. Take one flaming illustration of the truth of what I now declare. This was Luther's letter, the letter that found him, and revealed to him the true meaning of Christianity, and made him the flaming prophet of liberty, breaking the chains of cruel oppression from the captive people of God. Godet says with reference to Luther and this letter, "This was the pebble from the brook with which, like another David, he went forth to meet the papal giant and smite him in the forehead." Whenever the Church of God bends to a bondage which results from denial of the foundation principles of her life, we find in this letter to the Galatians the corrective for such apostasy.

In seeking for the message we must begin at the right point. We are perhaps a little prone to be occupied only with the denunciations which the letter contains. As a matter of fact, the profoundest value of this letter is not to be discovered in the denunciations. The profoundest value of the letter is discovered in its enunciations. To discover these is not to weaken the denunciations, but to understand their force. We read the declamatory passages; they must be read, and ought to be read; but we must understand what Paul meant when he said, "If any man preacheth unto you any gospel other than that which ye received, let him be anathema" ; we ought to understand what he meant when he declared that to produce works of the flesh which result from ritualism is to be excluded from the Kingdom of God. We do not understand the force of the denunciations save as we are conscious of the enunciations of truth which lie behind them. The truths constitute the dynamic. The teaching causes the explosion. We are often more occupied with the explosion than with the dynamic when we read this letter; more interested in the way in which Paul dealt with Peter when he came to Antioch, than with the reason of Paul's so dealing with Peter. If I am to discover and interpret in any sense intelligently the message of this letter I am compelled to lay my emphasis, not principally upon the denunciation, but upon the enunciation of principle; not upon the protest, but upon the proclamation that lies behind the protest.

The essential message of this letter has to do then with liberty. Its central teaching is a proclamation or enunciation of truth, concerning liberty. Its abiding appeal is a protest or denunciation of everything which contradicts that truth.

First, then, as to the central teaching. In the proclamation of Galatians the epistle to the Romans is found in essence. Here we have in unified form, in germ and potentiality, the great doctrines which are elaborated and systematically stated in the larger epistle. It is perfectly evident that this letter was written in the light, and under the impulse, of that great controversy which broke out at Antioch after the first missionary journey, and which resulted in the Council at Jerusalem. The apostle, in correcting error, did not go into any detailed statement of truth; but the truth is recognized.

The proclamation of this letter may be gathered round three words-life, law, love; and the teaching is condensed in three principal statements.

The fact of Life is recognized in the words, "He therefore that supplieth to you the Spirit" That is not to take a text out of its context; it is rather to discover within a text the supreme thought which inspired the teaching. The whole paragraph gives the apostolic conception of Christianity. Life is supplied in the supply of the Spirit. That is the root of Christianity in individual experience.

The fact of Law is recognized in the words, "The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are contrary the one to the other; that ye may not do the things that ye would." The doctrine involved is that the Christian life is not a life of licence; it is under law, but it is a new law, that of the lust of the Spirit. I retain the word lust, using it in its true sense of desire. As the root principle of the Christian life is the supply of the Spirit, the culture of this life is the result of obedience to the lust of the Spirit.

The fact of Love is recognized in the words, "The fruit of the Spirit is love." That is the final word, fruit, the triumph of the Spirit.

In these statements we have the doctrines of this letter revealed. Christianity is a life; its root principle is the supply of the Spirit. No man is a Christian unless he have the Spirit of God. But Christianity does not set a man free to go where he likes, or to do what he pleases There is a law for the culture of the life received, and it is that of the lust of the Spirit within the man; the Spirit desiring in him, correcting his desires. As man yields to the lust of the Spirit, he is master over the lust of the flesh. The outcome of such life, yielded to such law, will be love, which is the fruit, the triumph of the Spirit.

Let us pass over that ground again for it is fundamental. First, as to Life. Life is received by receiving the supply of the Spirit. The Spirit is received in answer to the exercise of faith. That is the master thought of the letter. The deduction from that is that nothing other than faith is necessary to salvation. Therefore to affirm that men must be circumcised or baptized in order to salvation is to proclaim the most deadly heresies that can possibly be taught. To superadd anything to faith is to destroy the foundations of Christianity. Life is by faith.

Secondly, as to Law. Liberty is not licence. When a man has life by faith he is thereby set free from all other bondage. He is set free from the bondage of the flesh, because he has the power that masters it and brings it into subjection. He is set free from the bondage of rites and ceremonies, because he has found life apart from rite, and without ceremony; and he is henceforward, so far as life is concerned, independent of all ceremony and of every rite. He is set free from bondage by life; but that liberty is not licence. The liberty of this life is that of the capture and constraint of the spirit of man, by the Spirit of God. The capture of the spirit of man by the Spirit of God means that man is made able to obey, and no man was made able to obey by circumcision or by baptism. Man is made able to obey when that life becomes law, and he yields to it. The lust of the Spirit within is the law of the new-found life.

Finally, as to Love. The fruit of this life, obedient to this law, is love; the whole life under the dominion of love, bondage to self is therefore no longer possible. When we read the fifth chapter, whatever wider application we may make of it, we must be true to the first line of its argument. I know there are more spacious applications of these Bible truths than were made by the writers. They dealt with great principles, the ultimate applications of which are far wider than the one the writers indicated at the moment. But when we read of "the works of the flesh," and "the fruit of the Spirit," we must remember that the passage is part

of one great argument. "The works of the flesh" are things which result from a religion which is not a religion of faith unto life. Works of the flesh are the activities of godless and irreligious men ; but primarily, in the apostolic argument, the phrase refers to things resulting from the observance of rites and ceremonies as though such observance constituted religion. Works of the flesh are things which result from ritualism which becomes an evasion of righteousness.

Here we touch the real reason of the vehemence of the apostle's anger. Superadd to faith anything else, as necessary to salvation, and inevitably the outcome is that faith is neglected. The moment we make anything other than faith supreme, we establish a rite-whether it be this, that, or the other, I care nothing-and men will say, If we fulfill this rite, then are we religious, and religion will be divorced from morality, religion will have lost the inspiration of righteousness. That is what is wrong with all false religion. That is the supreme difference between Christianity and every other religion. All the great systems of religion have rites, and ceremonies, and creeds, but no life. Consequently there is not the remotest connection between religion and morality. That is what the apostle saw was the supreme danger of these Judaizing teachers. They were adding to faith, which is the only way into life, with the inevitable result that presently men would say, We have observed this rite, now we can do what we like. All forms of sensuality and spiritual sin result from the tragedy of superadding something to the one law of faith.

Therefore the abiding appeal of this letter is of the nature of a protest. Its first note is a denunciation of the preachers of another gospel;-"If any man preacheth unto you any gospel other than that which ye received, let him be anathema." That is not an episcopal curse; it is not an apostolic malediction. It is the statement of the case as it is. "Let him be anathema." The word anathema, which means accursed, occurs in only one other passage in the New Testament, in the letter of Paul to the Corinthians, "If any man loveth not the Lord, let him be anathema." That is not a curse pronounced as by ecclesiastical authority; it is a declaration of truth concerning the condition of any man who loves not the Lord Jesus Christ; he is anathema ; therefore let him be anathema. And so with the use of the word in this letter ;-"If any man preacheth unto you any gospel other than that which ye received, let him be anathema" ; the man who preaches another gospel, by such preaching substitutes the false which issues finally in the works of the flesh, for the true which issues in the fruit of the Spirit.

Not only the preacher, but the receiver of the other gospel is severed from Christ. To trust in ceremony is to deny Christ; and to deny Christ is to be severed from Christ; and to be severed from Christ is to fall from grace. To add to faith in Christ as the foundation of religious life, either rite or ceremony, as necessary to salvation, is to deny Christ and to be severed from Christ, and fallen from grace.

I am not dealing with rites and ceremonies save as rites and ceremonies are made essential to salvation. Baptism has its place in the Christian Church. The observance of the Lord's Supper has its place in the Christian Church. The assembling of men and women for worship has its place in the Christian Church. But to make baptism, or the Lord's Supper, or the assembling. necessary to salvation, is to deny Christ.

There is only one way in which a man can be a Christian, and it is the way of honestly and sincerely saying,

"Nothing in my hand I bring,

Simply to Thy Cross I cling."

If I come to the Cross and say, By that and by my baptism I will become a Christian, I deny Christ.

The last note of the appeal is the solemn declaration that the practitioners of the deeds resulting from a false gospel, the deeds of the flesh, are excluded from the Kingdom of God. With what great and grave sense of responsibility the apostle wrote these words.

These were the terrible possibilities which Paul saw. These were the things that made his words vibrant with passion. His profound understanding of the peril of the Christian Church, through the influence of Judaizing teachers, called forth this letter.

In a closing word let us make a twofold application of the teaching of the letter. This Galatian letter warns the Church that to superimpose upon men any rite or ceremony or observance, as necessary to salvation, is to sever from Christ both in the case of the individual and in the case of the Church. I care not what the Church may be as to ecclesiastical conviction. I have less and less concern for such things. I am growingly convinced that ecclesiastical matters are not essential matters. There is room for every form of Church government within the economy of the Spirit of God. I decline controversy over ecclesiastical convictions. But whatever Church adds to faith in Christ, any rite or ceremony or observance of any kind, as essential to salvation, that Church is severed from Christ.

We need to get back to these fundamental documents, to these tremendous revelations of the apostolic writings; to the sense of the importance of things, which, if we are not very careful, we are allowing to appear as though they were unimportant. You began in the Spirit, will you attempt to gain perfection by the flesh? That is the great question of the letter. We need to-day to understand that in our preaching and in our teaching, and in order to strength of Church life for the accomplishment of the Divine purpose in the world, the one condition of salvation is that of faith in Christ, and the reception of life from Christ ; not because of our observance of rite or ceremony, but simply and solely and wholly by His great unmerited grace in response to faith. That is fundamental to personal Christianity and to Church life. Those guilty of superimposing upon faith any rite or ceremony or observance, as necessary to salvation, are anathema; whether they be individuals, or councils, or churches.

If I am emphatic about this, it is because the letter is emphatic about it. Where there is faith unto life, the life becomes a law, and there result no works of the flesh, neither sensual things, fornications, uncleanness, and lasciviousness; nor spiritual things, idolatry, sorcery, and the like.

The freedom of the Church is not political. It is spiritual or nothing. The only freedom that comes from absolute unbending loyalty to the will of God is bondage to the law of life, interpreted by the Spirit of God. Let us make our protest, and let it be vehement, against all bondage; but let us see to it that behind the denunciation is the enunciation of principle. It is only as we live in the power of that dynamic, that we shall be strong enough to burst all bonds, and fling off all yokes, and live in the spaciousness of spiritual freedom. May we learn the lesson and live the life.

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