

Remarks on Failure

by John Nelson Darby

The Epistle to the Galatians corrects the mildest and most universal form of error by which the grace of the gospel is perverted, emphasizing the importance of heeding the moral association of things in the mind of God.

Scripture: Galatians 1:6

Topics: "Doctrinal Purity", "The Danger of Legalism"

Description

John Nelson Darby addresses the critical issue of doctrinal purity in his sermon 'Remarks on Failure,' emphasizing the severe consequences of corrupting the gospel. He highlights the Apostle Paul's strong rebuke of those who distort the truth, warning that any deviation from the grace of Christ leads to spiritual ruin. Darby contrasts the laxity of contemporary attitudes towards doctrine with the seriousness of maintaining the integrity of the gospel, asserting that true faith must prioritize God's truth over human reasoning. He calls for a return to the foundational truths of grace and warns against the dangers of legalism and worldly influences within the church. Ultimately, he urges believers to uphold the gospel's purity and to recognize the vital connection between doctrine and moral conduct.

Transcript

Galatians

The title of this paper was given by the Editor: G. V. Wigram.

The leading subject of the Epistle to the Galatians, as is manifest, is the correction by God's Spirit, of the first form of error by which the doctrine of Christ began to be corrupted; and, it may be observed, there is a severity of expression in its terms of reprobation, both of the propagators of the error, and of the error itself, that has no parallel in any other of the Apostolic Epistles. This fact, bearing in mind that error in doctrine rather than evil in practice is the subject of the Spirit's censure - is very strikingly in contrast with our ordinary thoughts; and most especially opposed to the latitudinarian sentiments of the present day.

The principle of this is plain. Nature can take its measure of human conduct; but Faith only can estimate the importance of the truth of God. And perhaps there is nothing that more strikingly displays the low spiritual condition of the church, and its utter incompetency to judge of things according to the mind of God, than that laxity of feeling which prevails with regard to doctrine, in comparison with the moral walk.

It could never be imagined that God had placed the two in opposition - for, indeed, the doctrine of the gospel is "the doctrine according to godliness;" - but the tendency of the natural mind, as to their relative importance, is always to reverse the judgment of the word of God. The spiritual mind, however, which makes God and not self its centre, will at once discern that the sinking of the foundation is incomparably more fraught with danger than a fracture in the edifice; and the corruption of the truth, which creates and sanctifies the church, is infinitely more fatal than a lapse in the walk, which is but the external witness of the power of the truth within. The church may be recovered while the truth of Christ remains; but if Christ be gone, nothing but hopeless corruption must ensue.

This is plainly the ground on which that unparalleled severity of rebuke, which pervades this Epistle rests. For example; he says, "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that we have preached unto you, LET HIM BE ACCURSED. As we said before, so say I now again, if any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, LET HIM BE ACCURSED."

Here, in the outset, the Apostle, by the Spirit, enters his solemn protest, not against others only, but against himself, if he should ever swerve from the purity of that gospel he had preached. If man or angel, or himself, should ever become a perverter of the grace which he was empowered of Christ especially to proclaim, he invokes upon either a solemn curse; and thus raises a barrier against the possibility of his own, or others, turning back from the full position of grace and acceptance before God, into which the wondrous work of Christ introduces a sinner!

No authority must for a moment be allowed to cast a shadow over the full grace of the gospel; or question the divine truth of that declaration, "If any man be in Christ he is a new creature, (or a new creation), old things are passed away; behold all things are become new. And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ." A man may be warned how he builds upon this foundation; - and the word of the Spirit is express, "Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity" - but, other foundation can no man lay, than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." "Let God be true, but every man a liar." This is "the shield of faith;" and is the merited rebuke of the least perversion of the "true grace of God, wherein we stand."

Unquestionably the church is the place of holiness - "the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are" - but it is so, practically, only as it answers to the description, "the pillar and ground of the truth" - the wondrous vessel of that which the Apostle thus denominates. For he directly adds, "without controversy great is the mystery of godliness, God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up to glory."

This is "the truth" of which the church of the living God is to be the pillar and ground. It is both formative of its character and is the basis of its walk: - "He that saith he abideth in him, ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked."

Laxity of walk, or worldly principles and habits, may be corrected by bringing in the light to manifest the darkness - for we are to "walk in the light as he is in the light" - but when the truth is corrupted, the light becomes darkness, and the very instrument by which God is pleased to work is destroyed.

But our moral sense is outraged by flagrant conduct. Self is touched, in our associations, at least, when it is a question of walk. But it is only the spiritual sense that rightly estimates the danger of an inroad on the

truth; and it requires the sensitiveness of the spirit to turn us from seeking our own, and "not the things that are Jesus Christ's."

Still, nothing is more important, than to heed the moral association of things in the mind of God. For example, in Philippians, 3:19, those "who mind earthly things" are in the position of "the enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame!" This is God's moral connection of things; and the true contrast of this, is to have "our conversation in heaven, from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ."

So again, in a matter of more ordinary note, in 1 Tim. 6:9. "They that will be rich, fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish, and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil; which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows." This is God's moral association, and what in his mind is knit up with the commonest of all desires - the desire to be rich! And his path of escape is this, "Having food and raiment, let us be therewith content."

Also in Romans 16:17, 18. "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned, and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple." There is no middle course between serving the Lord Jesus Christ and one's own belly! And once more, in Cor. 15:32; "If the dead rise not - let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die;" just as in the corresponding truth our Lord associates the expression, "My Lord delayeth his coming" with the servant's beginning to smite his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken.

Now it is this Divine moral association of things, that accounts for the severity of expression, noticed, as pervading this epistle, whose object is to correct the very mildest - in our thought - and most universal form of error by which the grace of the gospel is perverted. For what is so common in the forms of Christianity around us, as the grafting of the law and Judaism on the gospel. But, it is this, which in this epistle calls forth the stern rebuke, "Behold, I Paul, say unto you that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace." "But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised: and that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage; to whom we gave place by subjection no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you." "Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain I desire to be present with you now, and to change my voice; for I stand in doubt of you." "When Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation." "O foolish Galatians who hath bewitched you that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth crucified? This only would I learn of 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 made perfect by the flesh? Ye did run well: who did hinder you, that ye should not obey the truth And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution? then is the offence of the cross ceased. I would they were even cut off, which trouble you!"

Now though there was manifest corruption and worldliness in the church of Corinth, and they were "carnal and walked as men," yet is their evil not rebuked in any degree with the sternness that pervades this epistle. It is true he says, "your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump;" - a universal principle, applied in Galatians to doctrine, as here to practice. And again in 2 Cor. 12:20, 21. "I fear lest when I come, I shall not find you such as I would, and that I shall not be found unto you such as ye would: lest there be debates, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, tumults; and lest when I come again my God will humble me among you, and that I shall bewail many which have sinned already, and have not repented of the uncleanness, and fornication, and lasciviousness which they have committed." In visiting those who had so sinned, he says, "I will not spare." But he does not once say, "I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain" - "I stand in doubt of you" - "Ye are fallen from grace" - "I would they were even cut off who trouble you" - "Christ shall profit you nothing" - "Christ is become of no effect unto you."

Alas! it is forgotten, that, if the church is to be the epistle of Christ, it is Christ known and valued, and all things else esteemed as dung and dross, in comparison, that can alone make her that epistle. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." And in vain is the cleanliness of the vessel and its external polish regarded, if the treasure which is alone of value be extracted!

Christ crucified and risen, and we risen in him, is the church's morality. "Let us hold fast grace whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear."

Whenever grace is questioned, and a legal standing sought, there is introduced the wholesale principle of the corruption of the church's morals - "walking in the light, as he is in the light:" and "walking as he walked." For in the first place, conscience will stop at the lowest point at which it can be satisfied; and in the next place, the law deals with the flesh of man, in which grace teaches us "there dwells no good thing." But grace leads to holiness, through a new nature, which is born of God, and the subduing of the flesh. Never therefore is holiness, in its true character, so much in danger as when it is sought to be established apart from grace - which in its grossest form, is the Puseyism of the present day. And often the assumption of an ascetic sanctity, where the gospel prevails, sinks into moral debasement, that shocks even the natural conscience.

In the opening of the epistle - "Paul, an Apostle not of man neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father who raised him from the dead" - we get a principle that characterises indeed, but extends much farther than the apostleship of Paul, and teaches us that nothing which is "of man" as its source, or "by man" as its authority, can be acknowledged in the Church of God. It must be, "by Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead." Hence he says, "I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ." Neither man's ordinances, nor man's authority, nor man's obedience, can reach up to Him whom God hath "set at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which, is to come; and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all." The grace of the gospel is a thing altogether beyond man's power, and independent of man's authority; and is thus wonderfully expressed by the Apostle, - "I, through the law, am dead to the law" - I have been killed by it outright - "that I might live unto God. I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me!" And this is the Christ, and this is the grace, that is to be guarded against all that is "of man" and "by

man"! For, whatever is "of man" or "by man," necessarily subverts this grace, which flows alone from its divine fountain - "Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead." Can any thing for a moment that is "of man" be borne with, by the heart that has learned this truth, "the son of God hath loved me and given himself for me?" or that which is so akin to it in Heb. 1. "Who being the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on High." It is on this ground, that the Apostle says, in 2 Cor. 5:16, "Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh; yea, though we had known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more." And, as already quoted, it follows, "Therefore if any man be in Christ he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold all things are become new. And all things are of God."

Now, in Colossians the warning is, "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men after the rudiments of the world and not after Christ. For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and ye are complete in him." What madness to attempt a supplement from man and his philosophy to the fulness of Him "in whom dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily!" But here it is by the introduction of the law and circumcision. "Tell me ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law." And "Behold I, Paul, say unto you, if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify to every man that is circumcised that he is a debtor to do the whole law." Whatever man, in his wretched blindness may attempt, the two things - grace and law - cannot before God stand together. In grace "all things are of God" but the law, addresses itself to man: it requires something of man, which he, in his ignorance of his own condition, attempts to meet: although "by the law is the knowledge of sin." "And as many as are OF the works of the law are under a curse." If law is his principle, then he is only under a curse. "For it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them."

The adding of "circumcision," which was the point at which this severely reprobated error touched the Galatians, was not in the least intended as an ostensible setting aside of the gospel, by the substitution of the law. But though they were deceived, the principle can receive no quarter. It may be only the addition of circumcision; but there is a principle involved in it which subverts the whole standing of grace - "If ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. Ye are fallen from grace!"

And yet this is the most natural condition into which the heart sinks that does not see - or has perhaps lost the perception of - the brightness of grace: and this on the most simple ground. For Judaism was God's own institution - his earthly institution - for maintaining intercourse with himself, on a lower ground than that of the veil being taken away. Judaism was the religion of a people at a distance from God; who, however near their priest might come, which their necessity required, had a veil between themselves and God. And whenever the heart practically loses its sense of that nearness to God to which his grace has introduced us through the eternally precious work of Christ, we naturally lapse into Judaism. Not that there may be a formal adoption of it as a system, but there is a natural adaptation in it to the heart that feels it right to be occupied about the things of God, but is not in the brightness of intercourse with God himself.

Hence the Apostle says, "When we were children we were in bondage under the elements of the world, but when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying "Abba, Father." This was their place: this their altered position, through accomplished redemption, to be in communication and intercourse with God, as children with a father. And he therefore asks, "Now, after ye have known God, or

rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, where-unto ye desire again to be in bondage?" It was the sweeping away of the whole position into which the redemption of the Son of God had brought them, to assume again the place of distance that belonged to those who were kept under the law shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed.

"Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain." This was Judaism, no doubt; but then Judaism, it is but little imagined, was itself composed of "the rudiments (or elements) of the world." "The first covenant had ordinances of divine service and a worldly sanctuary;" and the whole of the Jewish institution was arranged after the rudiments of the world. God had a righteous claim upon the people in the midst of this, but their religious institutions were arranged to meet their natural feelings as men. There was the beauty of the tabernacle and the costliness of the temple: - the gold and silver and precious stones; the silver trumpets on their feast days, and the magnificent garments of their priests, all which are now maintained by royalty and are to be found in palaces and courts, while their festive periods of commemoration are still found in the anniversaries of the world.

And it is this which gives it such a hold on our nature, and accounts for the universality of its prevalence, in conjunction with the profession of Christianity. It puts God at a distance, while it occupies the mind with religion, and sanctions the principles and elements of the world. "The way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest while as the first tabernacle was yet standing." God's presence could not then be reached. The veil was untaken away; and all that could be said of this array of services was, that they were carnal ordinances imposed on them until the time of reformation. And hence the severity of that word, "After that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements to which ye desire again to be in bondage?" "If ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why as though living in the world are ye subject to ordinances?" The cross leaves no place for the elements of the world! "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God. Death and resurrection, in Christ, alike leave Judaism and Gentilism amongst the "rudiments of the world;" while they introduce into the blessed knowledge and presence of God, and leave nothing to be rejoiced in, or to be desired, but "the hope of the glory of God."

Many other things in this epistle are worthy of note, but my object is not to give an exposition. In verse 15, 16, of chapter 1, "When it pleased God who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen: immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood," we get the whole principle of the Apostle's course and ministry. And this it was that also led him to say, "of those who seemed to be somewhat, whatsoever they were, it maketh no matter to me: God accepteth no man's person." His only object and concern, was, "that the truth of the gospel might continue with them." And if the course of Peter even is opposed to this, he meets an uncourtly and open rebuke; and his, and Barnabas's dissimulation is as plainly censured, as when he says to his own converts, "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth!"

It is this which fired him at the attempt to remove them "from the grace of Christ, into another gospel," and makes him say "I would they were even cut off who trouble you;" and at the close of the epistle to expose the hollowness of the wretched teaching of those principles, the destructiveness of which he had through the epistle so solemnly denounced - "as many as desire to make a fair show in the flesh, they constrain you to be circumcised; only lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ. For neither they, themselves, who are circumcised, keep the law; but desire to have you circumcised, that they may glory in your flesh." - "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the

world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature" - a new creation! If the cross brings inside the veil, - which it does, it at the same time, puts outside the world. God's "new creation" can combine with none of the elements of the old. The blood of the sin-offering, which brought the High-Priest within the veil, left the victim to be burnt outside the camp. "Jesus, that he might sanctify the people, suffered without the gate." The very thing which brings nigh to God, is that which entirely separates from the world!

Would that against all these attempts of the enemy to subvert the grace of the gospel, we had the faith to say, "From henceforth let no man trouble me; for I bear in my body the marks (Greek stigmata) of the Lord Jesus!" But alas! where is now the sensibility of heart to Christ, which causes the blush to mantle on the cheek, and the soul to be filled with indignation, at any attempted admixture of law and grace, which is but the subversion of the gospel. Where is to be found the exhibition of that word - "the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up?"

Alas! in a day when faith is low, large scope is left for the reasonings of the natural mind; and often the surest resting-places of the soul are treated as points of debate. What is divinely taught is firmly held; but even the truth of God, gathered by human deduction, never rises to the point of faith. The ground of so many questionings amongst God's children, is, that there is so little faith. Faith settles the soul in the truth, and keeps it in the presence of God. And the reason why known truth is so feebly held, is, that there is so little faith, and consequently so little of God. The certainty of faith seems like dogmatism to the man of reason; and appears like the claim to a special revelation to the Christian whose habit is to gather his conclusions by a rational process, instead of by the teaching of the Holy Ghost. We allow a license to the "lusts of the mind," which we should not dare to do in the "lusts of the flesh." But it is not the actions only, but every thought that should be brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

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