

Galatians: Indicative versus Imperative & Flow of Thought

As we seek to live out the work of Christ in our lives and on our behalf, what a struggle it is not to fall into antinomianism or legalism. It is so easy to separate those two worlds and say, “I live by grace through faith,” and then fall into antinomianism or legalism rather than grow in the fruit of the work of the Lord. In this lecture we will move forward into the problem of the indicative and the imperative. In Galatians there is already a certain tension established and acknowledged between living a godly life and battling against our sinful nature. As Paul the apostle and pastor deals with the Galatians, he concedes that it is a challenge to live out the three usages of the law, especially the second and the third—that the law drives you toward Christ and that a life dependent upon Christ leads to godliness. Those two contrasting statements, or statements that are in tension, are found in 5:24-ff and 5:13-ff. Thus we are establishing and following the argument of Paul to the Galatians: “You do not live by keeping the law; you live by grace alone.” And living by grace alone will lead to godliness, and that godliness will conform to the laws of God—but you will struggle. It will not be an easy road. It will not be like you may think it is when you read Galatians 5:25.

It would be easy to press someone and wrongly counsel them by saying, “Look what the Word of God says in Galatians 5:24-25: ‘Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.’” You could really do an injustice to someone who is struggling to live a godly life by focusing on this one verse and hammering them with the phrase, “...have crucified the sinful nature...” To make things worse, you could add your possible Greek knowledge and say, “You know that this is the aorist tense; it is a concluded, fixed action. Your sinful nature is now dead—finished; there is nothing left of it. You are now only living for God; you are now only bearing fruit. You are only under the full force of the third use of the law, which is not legalistic or antinomian, but you are compelled to live for God.” You would really do an injustice by saying this to someone. Yes, it is true as one side of the equation. That is one aspect that Paul presents to the Galatians: live in step with the Spirit, conform to the work that the Spirit is doing in your heart, and do not resist that. But there is another side.

The other side is in Galatians 5:13 and 16. Galatians 5:13 says, “You, my brothers, were called to be free.” Listen to that: “called to be free.” The second use of the law leads to freedom. “But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.” You see, it is still possible to indulge the sinful nature. You have received the Gospel and grace—you have been renewed by the Spirit of God—but you can still indulge in sin. The Reformers described this by saying that you are now, by the work of Christ, able to not sin. Before you live with Christ, you are not able to not sin, “Non posse non peccare.” Now you are able to not sin, “Posse non peccare.” That is an important point, but there is the concession in this verse that we can still indulge the sinful nature. We can still indulge that which opposes God and His purposes and power.

The other verse that we briefly wanted to look at is 5:16: “So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” Just as in verse 13 there is the concession that, as we grow as Galatian Christians or as 21st-century Christians, we are still capable of indulging the flesh or gratifying the desires of the sinful nature. Both are true: we are crucified with Christ—our sinfulness is finished—and yet we are still able to indulge in it. The Reformers, I believe, said it right: that you are at the same time justified, righteous, and a sinner. There is much discussion about this. I would say the focus in Galatians is, “Live by the Spirit. Let the work of God take over your life; let it win. Do not give into the possibility of sinning—you are free! You are able not to sin; you have the power to do so. Do not give into it. Strive to obey God in all things.” But it does concede that this is a real struggle. It is not just an

illusion or a faint possibility. In fact, sometimes this sinful nature seems to be much more prominent than the fruit of God's life in our hearts. But as we wrestle with that we must maintain the basic truth of the Gospel. This is even harder when we see that both of these are so much at work and we are embarrassed in the church when this shows its ugly head; and so we are trying to suppress that and hide it. And in trying to get away from that we fall into the sin of legalism. But while Paul makes this concession, acknowledging the struggle of the Galatians, he says, "You are saved by grace and that grace needs to be maintained as you wrestle with sin." Thus his advice here at the end is, "Lean on the Spirit. Let the Spirit of God win in your heart. Use the suffering you have in your life, and the discipline that God works into your life, as instruments to be yielded to the work of God. Let God take over in your life. As He has justified and regenerated you, let Him also work the fruit of sanctification out in your lives."

But we can give into our sinful nature by indulging it and that burdens the whole process. That is a great challenge for us as Christians: we know that this is a real, strong possibility, and it is still a power. Now, if you ask me, "Where is the righteousness and where is the sinfulness within a believer? Where do I locate that or describe it?" It would be like the centipede who suddenly asked, "How do my legs go?" When the centipede thinks about that he gets all crumpled up and cannot walk anymore. Thus I cannot answer that question. Someone else may be able to give you the psychology of this. I just know that people are very wrong when they say, for instance, "Our spirit is already pure and it is just our mind or our body that is still in need of growth." That is absolutely wrong. I will not try to describe the psychology or the location of that, but I do acknowledge that there are two elements operating in my life, and I am being moved to conform to the purposes of God on the basis of salvation alone. So you see, even though I describe it in such feeble terms, there is an enormous platform established with Galatians. This truth has enormous significance and consequence for the whole Christian life that then leads to further points of application. In some ways this is a basic pattern or structure that is established here in Galatians. We must return to Galatians over and over again to drink from the fountain of the basic Gospel because we cannot graduate from this. We are never at the point where we are not in need of the Gospel as it is presented in Galatians. We will never, in this life, reach the point where we have mastered how not to fall into these traps—where we are leaning on the Spirit and never falling back into sinfulness. Rather, because we will never reach that point until glory, we always need to return to these basic truths established in Galatians. Specifically, these truths of the necessity of dealing with our human nature and with the sense of expectation in God's Word and how we can actually grow toward that which God desires: godliness.

It has been asked, "How do we handle the responsibility of leaning on the Spirit and living from the Spirit rather than indulging our sinfulness?" That is an important question. From the final analysis, Philippians 1:6 is the answer: "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion." But that does not mean that we can just sit back, relax, and say, "You know, if I give into sin today that is just because God is not taking over today," thinking that we can wash our hands of any guilt or responsibility. Rather, I believe that God is moving to implant in our hearts, through the Gospel, the convictions of His great work on our behalf and the outgrowth of that as we understand His love toward us more and more. That was one thing that I noticed with some people I was with in Austria; they had a very small understanding of God's love, and therefore they experienced great problems in life. As we understand the work of God more, as His work on our behalf becomes more prominent in our lives, we will be more inclined to yield to Him. I believe that a strong understanding of God's work on our behalf actually frees us to follow in His ways. When you have a small appreciation of God's work, you will have great struggles. "He who has been forgiven much, loves much." Of course, we have all been forgiven enormously, but I still struggle with loving. So it follows that I have a rather small appreciation of what I have been forgiven. I would identify that as the pattern; it is not that we are compelled and

duty bound to grow in godliness because that is the Christian thing to do. But the goal is godliness. God seeks a people after His own heart. And I think it is very good for us, and not legalistic at all, to read the instructions of God—to read the Ten Commandments and let them sink in. I remember reading an 800-page book on the *Ramifications of the Decalogue for Life*. It was exciting and wonderful to see how God is looking out for the weak. The laws are not restrictive; they are protective. We learn of God's character by dwelling in His laws, but always on that Gospel basis; otherwise, we will fall into legalism.

In 5:13 there is the instruction: “But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.” In verse 14 there is the teaching on loving one another as the fulfillment of the law. Then in verse 15 there is the warning: “If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.” I do not believe that is a final consequence of losing salvation or anything of that sort, but if we yield to sin there are destructive consequences. There is a destructive consequence, for instance, exemplified in Corinthians; Christians are taking each other to the public court and demanding legal proceedings against each other. Yielding to sin produces absolute destruction and rifts within the Church. Thus, there is a warning because there are consequences of sinful action. It is painful to see that we reap what we sow. That is why God, in His grace and kindness, compels us to live godly lives so we do not have to bear the fruit of ungodliness. Galatians 5:17 says, “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.” This anticipates Romans seven, the chapter on the conflict of doing that which you do not want and wanting that which you do not do. Here the antithesis is already described: you cannot have it both ways. There is a clear animosity between these two natures; they do not peacefully coexist. There is a battle because the purpose of the Spirit is God-centeredness and the purpose of the flesh is self-centeredness—you cannot have it both ways. That conflict is clearly anticipated here. The only way out of this is to yield to the power of the Spirit—to the greatness of the work of God in your life—and to see that grow and bloom. So Romans seven and eight, which give probably the most extensive commentary on this verse, are the expansions of this verse, in regard both to the struggle and the solution.

It has been asked, “Can keeping the law help with sanctification?” I think the big question is, “How do you treat the instructions of God for your life?” Do you treat them as imperatives that you have to do, or do you treat them as the work of God that He is planning to do in your life? If you do it the second way, then Christ will always be your hope rather than the keeping of the law. Then I think you will be on the right way; you will be using the law in the way God intends us to apply the third use of the law.

Another common question is, “Does Old Testament law instruction still have a function?” Yes, with the basis of the Gospel, it does. It would be mostly concerning the moral law because, as I have explained, the ceremonial law has a certain discontinuity because it has been fulfilled in Christ. And the judiciary law does not directly apply anymore because the Church is not a political state like Israel was. But the moral law certainly still has an important function for us. How do we take up the instructions of God? How do we read them and bring them to our hearts? I think that is a very significant point. That is the problem of the indicative and the imperative; that is the challenge of, “How do we relate the accomplished, finished work of having been crucified with Christ to the struggle we are still in that is implied in Galatians 5:13 and 16? Here we have to find a way of sobriety. I am rather cautious when I hear the Gospel of Victorious Living, because its advocates seem to be implying that this is not such a real struggle anymore; if you live a decent life of prayer and dedication, you should have a victorious life and not struggle. We need to be careful about this because of what Galatians is saying, not because of what I am saying. There is still this struggle that Paul is speaking about here. Conversely, people—including some in the reformed tradition—might say, “You know, we are all just faking it. We are basically still as lost as the next unregenerate sinner.” This sort of stance is also out of sync with what

we learn in Galatians. Both extremes are Gospel teachings that do not deal with the sum total of what we learn in Galatians. I would say again that there is a certain emphasis on this struggle, that it is really possible. We must lean on the Spirit—we must seek to advance in godliness—but this struggle is still real.

I need to clarify the issue of the indicative and the imperative. The indicative says your sinful nature has been crucified; it is a statement of fact. The imperative is this: do not yield to the flesh but yield to the Spirit; it is an instruction, or a command. The indicative is a statement of reality: we have been crucified with Christ and sin no longer has any power over us. The imperative is a command: do not yield to the flesh, but yield to the Spirit. There is a certain tension between the indicative and the imperative.

Philippians 1:6 is a wonderful summary and conclusion to Galatians: “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion.” Thus we begin with the work of Christ and we end with the work of Christ. This struggle, the work of daily sanctification, is the work of Christ, but we are instructed to yield. It is a mystery in the end, but it is good that we can remind ourselves that it is God who is doing the work. We are just learning to align our minds and hearts with what God is doing. Paul wrote to the Galatians to help them to conform and align themselves with what God was doing rather than listen to the Judaizers who were saying, “You better keep the whole law or you are in trouble.”

As a footnote, let me say a few words regarding the flow of thought in Galatians. There is something interesting in the flow of thought in the section of 2:15 to 3:14. In this section Paul uses the literary style of contrasts when he discusses the significance of the law and the Gospel, or the promise to Abraham fulfilled in Christ. He uses antitheses, of which I will give you a few examples: “We are justified by faith, not by observing the law.” “Righteousness is gained through Christ, not through the law.” “We are crucified in Christ; we are not living for ourselves.” “We receive the Spirit by believing, not by observing the law.” There is always a positive and an antithesis. These are contrasting; you cannot have it both ways. Thus the literary style of antitheses underlines and supports the argument of Paul that you cannot live in both worlds. You can either live under the law or under Christ, but you cannot do both. The antitheses emphasize the content that Paul is after as he seeks to show that contrast. He is driving his point home through this rhetorical style; you have to know which side you are on and you cannot move across the line all the time. This lecture may have been a lot to digest, but I hope you have seen that Paul’s words to the Galatians relate to our own lives as we wrestle with that every day. An important part of the Gospel’s truth has been emphasized as Paul brings the Gospel to the Galatians.