

20260419 The Gospel and The True Heirs

Galatians 4:21-31

Galatians clarifies and defends the true gospel: how a person is saved or justified. Being saved or justified means a person is delivered from sin and death and is brought back to God's presence. This is entirely through faith in what God has accomplished in Christ. We call this justification by faith alone. The letter is a tightly argued whole, so every passage must be read in its context.

The letter was addressed to Gentile Christians in Galatia. False teachers from a Jewish background had entered the churches, claiming that faith in Christ alone was not enough. Since the Jews were God's chosen people, they argued that Gentile believers must be circumcised and keep the Mosaic law to become Jewish, and thus become children of Abraham and part of God's people.

Paul, therefore, begins the letter with a strong rebuke of this "different gospel." In chapters 1–2, he defends the divine authority of his gospel by recounting the history of his conversion and ministry. From chapter 3 onward, he develops his argument for justification by faith alone: first appealing to the believers' experience in the Spirit; then alluding to evidence from Scripture— that by faith, not by the works of the law, they are already children of Abraham and God's people. The key argument focuses on the identity of Abraham's children. Last week, Pastor Bijoy preached Galatians 4:1-7, saying that we are not only Abraham's children but, even more importantly, God's children.

Today's passage further argues that those who seek justification by the law and their works are not children of Abraham. Relying on works not only fails to save but must be "cast out."

The Pretext: The Powerful Deception of False Teaching (4:8-20)

Let us first briefly look at the relevant material in Galatians 4:8–20, as it provides the background for today's passage. The passage says, "Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces?" Paul continues, "Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?" The text shows that the situation in the Galatian church is very serious. Some bewitched believers not only follow the false teacher but also see Paul as their enemy. Because the false teaching is so deeply deceptive, Paul must present an even more forceful argument in Galatians 4:21–31, which we will examine today. I will talk about three things: two sons, the true son, and the true son's living.

I. Two Sons (4:21-23)

Since the Jewish false teachers claimed that only Jews were Abraham's children. Paul used the story of Abraham's two sons to turn the tables on them.

"Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise."

The Scripture Paul referred to is the story in Genesis 12-17. After a long period of confusion and chaos following humanity's fall, God at last revealed Himself and His plan of salvation to Abraham. God promised to bless Abraham with descendants and land, foreshadowing the spread of salvation to humanity (Gen 12:2-3). Abraham believed God's promise would come to pass. But the problem was that Abraham was very old and his wife, Sarah, was barren. They felt they had to do something to help God realize His plan. In the ancient Near Eastern world, a wife could give her slave girl to her husband so that she might bear children on her behalf. Abraham and Sarah followed the culture norm. Hagar gave birth to a son, Ishmael.

Though God forbore Abraham's polygamy, He did not stand by when this family took matters into their own hands. God told Abraham that Ishmael was not the promised son. God said, "Sarah, your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him." (Gen 17:19) The Lord did for Sarah as He had said. Sarah gave birth to a son, Isaac.

Abraham had two sons. One was born of a slave woman, according to the flesh, representing the effort of the natural life, the broken humanity. The other was born of a free woman, through God's promise. These two sons belong not only to Abraham's story, but also reflect the two kinds of life within each of us. The flesh—that is, our fallen humanity—always tries to take control through works and to gain a sense of worth; but the new reborn life receives God's blessing through faith and surrender. The son born according to the flesh represents those who rely on the efforts of the flesh; such people cannot receive God's blessing. Only the son born through the promise, by faith, is the heir of God's blessing.

Now come back to Paul's argument. The false teachers claimed that only Jews are the children of Abraham, the people of God. And the Scripture makes it clear: Isaac, not Ishmael, is the son who inherits Abraham's covenantal blessing. Guess which lineage those false teachers would think they themselves belong to, Ishmael or Isaac? Notice also that Paul highlighted the two mothers' identities: one a slave woman and the other a free woman. Paul then continues to explain the meaning.

II. The True Son (4:24-27)

"These things are being taken figuratively: The women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children." (4:24-25)

Paul allegorically links Hagar to the false teachers. Earlier, in 3:23–24 and 4:1–3, he had already associated slavery with the Mosaic law. Here, he extends that connection: Hagar is in slavery, so she corresponds to the Mosaic law, then further to Mount Sinai, where the law was given, and to the present earthly Jerusalem, the center of law observance. From there, the line becomes clear—earthly Jerusalem represents those who rely on the law, namely the false teachers, while Mount Sinai in Arabia is linked to Ishmael's line.

Therefore, Paul is saying that those who seek justification through the Mosaic law belong to Hagar—they are in slavery. They are not heirs of the Abrahamic promise but, in a spiritual sense, outsiders. In this way, Paul turns the tables on the Jewish false teachers and declares that they are not the true children of Abraham.

After discussing Hagar and the Sinai covenant, we might expect Paul to turn to Sarah and the Abrahamic covenant. But Paul skips Hagar and the Abrahamic covenant. He goes right to the heavenly Jerusalem, the antithesis of the earthly Jerusalem. “But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written: ‘Be glad, barren woman, you who never bore a child; shout for joy and cry aloud, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband.’”(4:26-27)

The passage quoted is from Isaiah 54:1, which immediately follows Isaiah 52-53, the song of the Suffering Servant, which prophesies the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Isaiah 54:1 foretells the deliverance of the exiled Israelites and the restoration of the desolate Jerusalem, and the Gentiles joining the Israelites.

Paul says that the restored Jerusalem is the heavenly Jerusalem, which is free, and that is connected to Sarah. Sarah’s son was born as the result of a divine promise. And the Gentiles by faith are the children of the barren woman (Sarah). They are the true heirs of Abraham.

Paul continues to tell us how the true son should live.

III. True Son’s Living (4:28-31)

“Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does Scripture say? “Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman’s son.” Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.”

Paul says the false teaching of justification by works will persecute us who are justified by faith alone.

Abraham’s example shows us the natural human tendency when faced with our situations. The sin-contaminated human nature always wants to take control. We think we can make things happen, or at least make meaningful contributions. Satan whispers into our ears, “Did God really say He will accomplish things for you? You will not certainly end badly if you take control, and you will be worthy like God. You can make things happen.” The temptation of doing things “by the means of the flesh” is always strong.

The means of the flesh always persecutes the means of the Spirit. But the Bible gives one command for Christians’ living: “Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman’s son.”

We need to cast out the means of the flesh and put our faith only in what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. Human efforts and merits have no part in our receiving salvation or in walking the journey of faith. We are saved by faith alone, and we please God by faith alone in our lives, because we are true heirs of Abraham. We are free and beloved children of God, and we are to live a new life in Christ.

We must not underestimate how stubborn and influential the flesh is. On the one hand, fallen humanity takes pride in meeting the requirements of the law, feeding its ego. On the other hand, it seeks to escape responsibility—once the minimum is met, it declares, “I’ve done it. I am good now,” and walks away to live its own life on itself. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for reducing love for God and others to a set of rules. They claimed to have obeyed the law by giving temple offerings, yet went no further, neglecting their responsibility

to care for their parents (Mat 7:11). The famous 20th-century thinker and writer C.S. Lewis described what our flesh looks like in his book “Mere Christianity” that a) we want to keep well away from anything that might make it feel small; and b) we are very much like an honest man paying his taxes. He pays them all right, but he does hope that there will be enough left over for him to live on. Because we are still taking our natural self as the starting point. The self-centric flesh eventually produces vices in our lives. We will discuss this more in Chapter 5.

But someone might say, “Jesus paid the price to save me. Surely, I should do something to make myself at least a little worthy of salvation.” Years ago, my pastor told me a story. An American evangelist once stayed in a fisherman’s home for a year. Over time, they grew very close—the old fisherman treated the young man like his own son. Yet there was one thing he could not accept: that salvation comes by faith alone, not by works. Eventually, the fisherman decided to leave and go to a Buddhist temple for spiritual practice. On the night before his departure, he took out a large, shining pearl and gave it to the young man as a gift. The evangelist knew the story behind that pearl. An idea came to his mind. He took out all the money he had and offered it to the old man. The fisherman was deeply hurt and angry. “My son gave his life to obtain this pearl,” he said. “Do you think you can buy it with money?” The young man looked at him and replied, “Jesus gave His life for our salvation. Do you think you can earn it by your works?” At that moment, the fisherman realized the true nature of the gospel. We receive salvation and please God by faith alone, not by works. We need to deny ourselves, our natural, broken selves.

The same is true of our salvation and our journey of sanctification. To redeem us from sin and death, and to bring us back into God’s presence as His beloved children, Jesus Christ paid the price with His own life. There is no way for us to earn this grace through our good works. We are saved, and we please God, by faith in Christ alone. After receiving the gospel, we will experience a gradual yet inevitable transformation in our lives—the Holy Spirit will bear the fruit of good works in our new life. The only way to live this out is by faith: denying ourselves, relying on the work of the Spirit, rejecting and casting out the self-righteous impulse of the flesh within us, and taking up our cross to follow Jesus.

Summary

The false teachers claimed that justification comes through both believing in Jesus and observing the Mosaic law. Their key argument was that justification means becoming children of Abraham, members of God’s people, and heirs of the blessings of salvation. Their teaching was deeply deceptive, and some Galatian believers began following them.

Paul uses the stories of two sons of Abraham and their mothers to argue that the Gentiles, by faith, are true sons of Abraham. When Christ’s salvation comes, those observing the Mosaic law are not heirs of the Abrahamic blessings. Those of faith are true heirs of Abraham, who receive the salvation blessings from God. Paul warns believers about the dangerous power of the flesh. He gives clear imperatives for Christian living – cast out the flesh and live in Christ’s freedom.