

The Letter of Paul to the Galatians

Paraphrased,
explained,
for today.

GOOD NEWS

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Hans-Jörg Ronsdorf

Only if the Son sets you free are you truly free.

John 8:36

Book description

The letter to the Galatians is paraphrased in my own words, i.e., it is re-rendered in an explanatory way. The amount of text is approximately three times the length of the original biblical text of a classical Bible translation.

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First Things First

You are holding an *explanatory rendering* of Paul's letter to the Galatians in your hands. As the author, I put myself in the writer's place and try to put his thoughts on paper in an explanatory and therefore fuller way. My text is about three times as long as the original text. In other words: If I were to explain this letter, or each verse, to someone briefly and concisely, it would be exactly what you are about to read here.

I hope that this will help you understand the message of the letter better and find the connection to your own life. Because that is what it's all about. My text is not God's Word, quite unlike Paul's original letter. You can read that for yourself in a Bible, or alongside my text.

That is why I have a request for you at this point – before you read the introduction: *Take a Bible and first read through this whole letter there.* It helps to read aloud. Even if you don't understand something, keep reading. That way you get a first impression or refresh your memory. You will see: Galatians – perhaps Paul's first and oldest letter – is a very beautiful letter. It touches the deepest strings of the gospel and lets them sound out. *It is a letter that speaks not only to Christians but also to Jews and Muslims. In interfaith dialogue it helps to show what the gospel is and how it differs from all other religions.*

What Had Happened?

Most letters of the New Testament have an occasion. So does this one.

Put yourself in the place of the apostle and missionary Paul for a moment. He and his coworker have trekked along difficult paths over the Taurus Mountains and are traveling on foot in the mountains of Anatolia (Turkey). Completely exhausted, he meets people there in the region of Galatia, to whom he proclaims Christ, who died for them on the cross. These people are – unlike Paul – not Jews. These people may well know Jews as well as their customs and practices. They themselves worship various idols and do not know the one true God. The gospel message strikes the hearts of these people, and they come to conversion, to repentance and to a living faith in Jesus Christ. This faith is alive; it becomes visible in a new life in the fellowship of all the disciples.

Some time later the following happened: Paul has long since traveled on. Now Jewish-Christian teachers (*Judaizers*) came to these Christians and demanded: If you really want to belong to God's people, if you want to be children of Abraham and heirs of his promise, then all you still need is to be *circumcised* (to become Jews, as it were). Circumcision was the covenant sign that has been binding on every Israelite since Abraham, in order to belong to this covenant with its blessings and obligations.

What Did These Jewish-Christian Teachers (Judaizers) Teach?

These Christian Jews did not reject Christ. But they rejected Paul and *his gospel*. Nor did they teach that a person is justified before God by good works of the law. They taught that it is *only through circumcision that one truly belongs to God's people*.

Social interaction with one another (that is, between Jews and Christians from the nations) would also become easier. The Jews did not eat at the same table with the nations, that is, with the uncircumcised. Even though that was not a commandment of Moses, but an added, human, Judaizing commandment.

These Judaizers could not and would not see that with the coming of Christ the era of the law of Moses came to an end. They thought God worked solely through the Jewish nation to spread the promises given to Abraham. Paul's argument against this is: *In God's plan of salvation the law has now fulfilled its purpose*, and therefore it is wrong to keep it. And to demand that the nations accept it. It is wrong to believe that God still works in a nationalistic way, that is, through Israel. God's people now consist of people from all nations.

For at least three reasons Paul condemns the Judaizers and their teaching: (1) They did not understand the *all-sufficiency and universality of Christ's work of redemption*. (2) They did not understand that Christ and the Spirit far surpassed the law of Moses and its national character. (3) And they did not recognize that God gives the Holy Spirit to all believers (Jews and nations). The consequence is that Christians do not have to be guided by the law. Instead they have the Spirit, who leads them in a way that corresponds to the moral law (e.g., the Ten Commandments, without the Sabbath commandment). And also fulfills it – but does not have it as its goal. *The leading of the Spirit does not lead back into the law of Moses, but into a life in which the law of Christ and the Spirit of God become the rule of life of the new creation*.

A Jewish morning prayer shows how (some) Jews saw themselves:

Blessed are you, Eternal One, our God, King of the world, who did *not* create me a Gentile. Blessed are you, Eternal One, our God, King of the world, who did *not* create me a slave. Blessed are you, Eternal One, our God, King of the world, who did *not* create me a woman.

That is national pride; that is social status and discrimination by sex. Paul takes radical action against this, as one can learn in this letter.

What Upsets Paul So Much?

In no other letter is Paul so radical in refuting and condemning these Judaizing teachers of the law. *The Galatians did not notice that the truth and uniqueness of the gospel were being thrown overboard.* They wanted to keep Christ, but it was suggested to them that they also needed Moses and circumcision. Then they would really be sons of Abraham and belong to God's chosen people.

By getting the Galatians to opt for *Jesus plus Moses*, the Judaizers destroy the very need for Christ at all. Paul makes it clear: "If righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing" (2:21), and: "If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all" (5:2). Regarding the denial of God's power in the Spirit, Paul says: "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law" (5:18). This means that those who choose the Spirit do not need his law; those who choose Jesus do not choose Moses. You cannot have both. Paul's message is uncompromising: *Christ alone.*

What Kind of Law Does Paul Condemn?

When it comes to the law of Moses, the Torah, it is important to state that it is holy and good. It includes not only the Ten Commandments – altogether it comprises all five books of Moses. Compared with Israel's neighboring peoples, it is morally and ethically unique and outstanding. To this day. Even in our German constitution, the Basic Law (Grundgesetz), its good influence can be seen. Paul would never condemn the law and every effort to keep it. The law is a wonderful gift of God to his people Israel. Paul kept it. If someone had broken it unknowingly, the sacrificial service of the law of Moses could bring forgiveness.

The *Pharisees* had added human commandments to the law and tried to regulate as many areas of life as possible – down to washing hands – in a pious way. They imposed this obligation on themselves and on the people. They were a Jewish group at the time of Jesus that took the law very seriously – and wished that for all Jews. A kind of piety movement. Paul himself was once one of them. A zealot, until Christ entered his life. They had their problems with Jesus because he saw right through them. He denounced the *human commandments*. And the neglect of the great commandments, *to love God and one's neighbor*. These most important commandments fell by the wayside. In Matthew 23 you can read what Jesus thought about the Pharisees and their legalism.

Legalism in Galatians is clinging to the law of Moses in order to please God. But this is not to be understood simply as insisting on rules. What is wrong with this legalism is *that it pushes Christ and the Spirit aside*. It is wrong because it (1) does not understand that in Christ and through the Spirit the law of Moses has been fulfilled and is therefore history for good. Furthermore it is wrong that (2) the Judaizers *force the nations to be Jews* (through circumcision). In this respect Paul attacks an unbiblical view of the law with its nationalistic features, which these Judaizers hold.

What Are Works of the Law?

They are behaviors or measures of the Judaizers that on the one hand agree with the law of Moses. But it was wrong to claim that Christ's work of redemption and the leading of the Spirit were insufficient for daily life.

The "works of the law" are actions dictated by a law that has now been displaced by Christ and the Spirit. "Works of the law" are also Jewish practices that set up boundaries between Jews and non-Jews. God's law does not focus on social boundaries that divide. Instead, one could see in it God's will revealed for all people.

Legalism Today

The problem of the Celts (Galatians) cannot be transferred *one-to-one* into our time and culture 2,000 years later. But there are lessons for us today. The question is: How can we live to the glory of God? Can't the law of Moses or the Ten Commandments help us with that?

The answer of Galatians is: *Christ in us* and *God's Spirit in us* produce the "*fruit of the Spirit*." In our everyday lives. That corresponds to the *law of Christ*.

In many Christians an inner mechanism of thoughts and feelings is at work, drifting from free and freely given grace into performance mode: They want to be more God-fearing and come closer to God. They sense that activity builds them up and does them good. But in doing so they do not notice the deception that it is about their own performance and doing their duty, which gives them a sense of apparent holiness or spirituality. But we have and are everything in Christ – and he is in us. Nothing can be added to that.

How do we identify legalism? We look out for practices, attitudes, demands, requirements and theological views *that neglect the gospel in its central statements about the all-sufficiency of Christ and his work of redemption and the centrality of the Holy Spirit for our everyday life together*.

That does not mean that in our churches or congregations we simply look for unpleasant rules or binding regulations that we do not like. Rules can indeed be good for spiritual growth. Legalism, understood and lived in the sense of good rules and habits, is not bad in itself. That is why this term must be used with care. For if a Christian regularly reads the Bible, regularly prays, regularly attends the worship service, that is not the legalism of the Pharisees or of the Judaizers in Galatia. Discipline in the kingdom of God is useful and often necessary. But some things are a balancing act. If I do these things because they make me feel important among Christians and more loved or favored by God, then I have fallen into the trap of religiosity. Many good things can turn into legalism. As an outward form that does not come from the heart. Not from love for God. Good spiritual habits are an integral part of Christian life and not legalism. But they can become it.

What Lesson Does This Letter Have for Today?

Our following in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ happens in *faith*. In trust in the Father. Like children holding on to Jesus' hand.

Despite our devotion, we are aware of our *inability* to do good in our own strength. Also, and above all, as Christians. That is why we do not put ourselves under religious pressure to perform. We do not pretend. Hypocrisy is the brother of legalism. We are honest with ourselves, with others and with God, who knows our hearts. He knows that we love him. Like Peter back then, when he had failed all along the line, in Jesus' hardest hour. Yet Peter loved Jesus, even though there were mistakes and failure. Therefore: We do not let any *sanctification stress* into our lives. That is the breeding ground for pride or despair and fear of failure. We live in freedom and in grace. *We are accepted forever with all our mistakes, with all our weaknesses, and yes, with all the sins we commit. For we belong to Christ, who died for our sins.*

Everything God gives us is not his response to our faithfulness, performance or determination. We receive, experience, enjoy and achieve everything – every child of God does – on the basis of faith. On the basis of childlike, almost blind trust in our God. Faith moves God's heart. That is what counts for him. That is how we give him the glory. Faith that says: We need Jesus and the Spirit, nothing else.

Living in God's unconditional acceptance as daughters and sons means freedom. In freedom we grow up. Good fruit becomes visible. *Christ is formed in us.*

Examples of Religious and Christian Legalism

It is always exciting to name examples from our own time. For there are the most varied forms of legalism. In high doses or in residual amounts. In personal life and in life together.

The most striking and most widespread legalism I have encountered is where people try to earn salvation with good works. But we do not receive salvation through merit, not through human mediation or sacraments. We receive it through Christ alone.

Galatians is also about legalism being chosen in order to live in a way that honors God. And in the way that is proper if one wants to belong to God's people. This kind of legalism meets with Paul's rejection just as much as the first. The examples I give can be misunderstood, if one wants to.

Example: When you hardly ever or never get around to reading the Bible and having times of prayer. When your quiet time often falls by the wayside. Unintentionally or out of negligence. Then feelings of guilt can arise. You feel guilty or unworthy. You feel like a failure. But that shows that we have not understood that in Christ we are unconditionally accepted as sons and daughters. This relationship with the Father stands. Always! We are loved and 100% accepted at all times. Of course Bible reading and prayer are important. But most Christians in the first centuries had no Bible, and yet they were effective witnesses of Jesus, whose faith was working through love in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Example: There are supernatural experiences in the Holy Spirit such as revivals, healings, miracles, being caught up in the Spirit, speaking in tongues and special experiences in prayer. Anyone who experiences such things, but then nothing of the kind for a while, must not conclude from this that he is now loved less. These experiences never prove that one is loved more or less. If they fail to come, nothing changes in our relationship with God. Although one may look for reasons, one should never despair over it. *We live by faith, not by sight and experiences.*

No one may prescribe experiences or insights to a Christian (e.g., baptism in the Spirit, speaking in tongues) in order to be a "complete" or "proper"

Christian. No one may dictate how the Lord's Supper must be understood and practiced in order to be a "faithful" Christian. Just as little may anyone prescribe standards for hair and clothing, liturgies of worship or seating arrangements. No one may pressure a Christian about how he has to behave with regard to politics in order to be separated from the world. Within the framework of biblical instructions there is great freedom. Every narrowing or anxiousness regarding what is allowed and what is not testifies to a legalistic, weak faith and does not correspond to the full maturity of the sons and daughters of God.

When such things become the reason for refusing one another fellowship, even in the breaking of bread, then that is Pharisaic and Judaizing legalism. *Some are in and the others are out.* In view of the unity so strongly invoked in Galatians (3:29), a scandal.

A judgmental spirit that condemns and disqualifies others corresponds exactly to the attitude of the Judaizers. They said: If you are circumcised, you belong and everything is OK (even if whatever else the law said did not matter). Keeping human forms and liturgies degenerates into hypocrisy before people and God if that is all the piety one lives.

Many approaches are good, as long as they do not work against life in Christ and the joy and freedom of the Spirit, or even extinguish them.

Legalism is hardly an issue anymore today. Rather the counter-reaction to it: that nothing has to be kept anymore, and freedom ends in an egoistic and individualistic way of life without any sense of responsibility. In this way freedom is misunderstood and becomes a danger. Paul will point this out in this letter, to keep us from falling off the horse on the other side.

Finally: No, as Christians we do not fulfill the law out of gratitude either, as is often said. The fact is, as Romans 8:4 shows, that those who follow Christ and are led by the Spirit, as grown-up sons of God, naturally fulfill the moral requirements of the law. How could God's law and the working of the Spirit contradict each other anyway? But they do not fulfill the moral law because it is their standard, but because the Spirit and Christ live in them. *The time of the law of Moses is over forever. The law of Christ is now the epitome of a Spirit-led life.*

Freedom from the law does not promote "cheap grace," with which it does not matter how we live. Freedom is not a license. It encourages and it demands. Freedom and grace place us under obligation. In a mysterious way God's Spirit produces in us the fruit at which we ourselves may marvel with gratitude. That

is not being controlled by someone else, but self-determination in a new life. That is Christ in us. That is the Spirit of sonship, who speaks in us and out of us to the Father: Abba, Daddy, Father!

Galatians: The Magna Carta of Christian Freedom and of the Gospel

The gospel that Paul received by revelation from God brings salvation, justification, acquittal in Christ for all people. And the gift of the Holy Spirit as the power to live. Made sons and daughters of God, they live in freedom, through faith that becomes visible in love and in the fruit of the Spirit.

It is about how Christ, through the Spirit, transforms our lives into responsible freedom and serving self-giving in such a way that the strict requirements of the law (and human additions) are surpassed.

With this, the law of Moses and circumcision and the national identity of Israel as the sole bearer of the promise and mediator of blessing belong to the past. All this is now only a shadow of what has come in Christ. The two can never be combined or mixed.

The Themes of the Letter and Their Contrasts

The old, the past, and the new that has come in Christ. An overview, in no order of importance.

Christ	Moses
God's Holy Spirit	Law
God's Holy Spirit	Flesh, sinful human nature
Faith, trust, faithfulness	Works of the law, doing
Promise, God's pledge	Law
God's blessing	Curse, consequences of breaking the law
Freedom	Slavery
Adult sonship	Slavery; childhood under supervision.
Inheritance	Uncertainty
New creation; eternal life	Circumcision/foreskin
Grace	Law
Unity of the church	Exclusive Jewish nation
Baptism in water	Circumcision of the foreskin
Justification, acquittal	Condemnation
Gospel, good news	Law
Cross of Golgotha	Present evil age, flesh
Isaac	Ishmael
Jerusalem above	Earthly Jerusalem, Sinai
New covenant	Old covenant
Sarah, the free woman	Hagar, the slave woman, not free

The Christian in the Letter to the Galatians

Every letter of the New Testament describes in its own way what God has made of us humans when he drew us to himself. How we have been showered with gifts and what we have now become by grace. It is indeed a whole “catalog of salvation,” which in itself leads to amazement. Who would ever have thought that the eternal God has so much in store for us and even gave his own Son for it. Here are all the texts from Galatians that say something about the believer. God wants us to believe this, to build on it and to experience it in our lives. The *whole wealth of salvation* has been given to us. Now it is a matter of taking possession of it in a very practical way in daily life. And of living (and experiencing) it.

- Jesus gave himself as a sacrifice for our sins (1:4).
- rescued from the present evil world (or the present age) (1:4)
- freedom in Christ Jesus (2:4; 5:1)
- justified by faith in Christ (2:16-17)
- died to the law (2:19)
- living for God (2:19)
- crucified with Christ (2:19)
- Christ lives in the believer (2:20)
- loved by Christ (2:20)
- received the Spirit (3:2, 5)
- blessed through faith (3:9)
- redeemed from the curse of the law (3:13)
- received the promise of the Holy Spirit (3:14)
- life not by law, but by faith (3:21-22)
- sons of God through faith (3:26)
- We have clothed ourselves with Christ (3:27).
- We are in Christ (3:28; 5:6).
- We belong to Christ (are his property) (3:29; 5:24).
- redeemed to receive adoption as sons (4:5-6)
- The Spirit of the Son is in our hearts (4:6).
- God is our dear Father (4:6).

- heirs through God (4:7)
- Christ is formed in us (4:19).
- born according to (of) the Spirit (4:29)
- called by God (5:8, 13)
- We act by the Spirit (5:16, 25).
- The Spirit leads us (5:18).
- We live by the Spirit (5:25).
- heirs of the kingdom of God (5:21)
- eternal life (in the resurrection) (6:8)
- members of the household of faith (6:10)
- crucified to the world (6:14)
- a new creation (6:15)

Greeting, Address and Blessing 1:1-4

This is Paul writing to you. An envoy of Jesus Christ. His apostle. In fellowship with his God and Father he entrusted the good news, *his gospel*, to me.

It was not just any person or group of people who sent me out. But the Father, who raised Jesus from the dead and confirmed him as the Son of God and Messiah. Through him the age *of grace* was proclaimed. A *new creation* founded in Christ.

I greet you together with all the brothers who are here with me. With them I am united in the *one gospel*. I greet all the churches of Galatia.

Grace and *peace* from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ: May he give you protection, care, help and wholeness every day, wherever you are and whatever you do!

Forgiveness and Liberation, Because God Wills It 1:4-5

I am writing the most important thing to you Galatians first, so that we never forget what it is really all about; what our security consists of and what our Redeemer's heart's intention is: He, our Lord *Jesus, gave himself for our sins and failings, for our misdeeds and transgressions.* Into death. Out of unconditional love. As a voluntary and sinless sacrifice. Only he, the sinless one, could take the great burden of our sins upon himself and do away with them forever through his death on the cross. And he did it! We could not undo our sins and missteps – no matter what we achieved in works of the law and moral or religious discipline. *We needed the Messiah – nothing else!*

So he rescued us and tore us out of the evil world. By taking away our sins, with which we were bound and chained to this world. He did not want to leave us where people thoughtlessly live in sins. Enslaved in them without knowing it. Our Liberator gave us a *new beginning in his kingdom of love.* He wanted us for himself. He set us free from the fallen world, far from God. From a culture and society that does not know the true and living God. Just as God once set Israel free from Egypt, so it is his will today, too, to save the whole world – no matter whether we are descended from the Jews or from the nations.

That was the will of our God and Father! His unrelinquishable and unfathomable purpose of salvation. That is why glory and honor belong to him in every possible way, now and forever! Amen.

There Is Only One Gospel 1:6-10

I am totally astonished that in such a short time you have turned away from precisely this grace of Jesus Christ. Until now something like that seemed impossible to me. Just as unexpected as Israel back then. In spite of a magnificent rescue, it fell away from its God in no time at all. It simply replaced him with a golden calf while Moses was on Mount Sinai.

So it is with you: Although the God of the fathers called you in the Messiah Jesus to his tremendous grace, you have now gotten involved with a gospel *that is no gospel at all*. You are letting yourselves be confused by some people who are twisting the *inviolable gospel of the grace of Christ*.

I tell you: No matter who comes to you, even if it were an angel like back then at Mount Sinai, even if *we* came to you once more and proclaimed to you something other than at the beginning – *let him be cursed!* He has no share in what the gospel of Jesus Christ gives us in grace. They will perish with their seductive message. Let nothing remain of them.

I have said it and I say it now once again: If anyone comes to you and proclaims to you another gospel that contradicts what I proclaimed to you and what you accepted: Let him be cursed! For him there is nothing but God's judgment and condemnation. For they destroy the best thing God has given us. They lead people straight into ruin. *Away from grace, toward legalism*.

With such a threat to the gospel, should I rather not speak so bluntly, in order to please people? After all, I am to please God alone! If I tried to please people, for example you or these false messengers, then I would not be the servant of Jesus Christ. Never!

Dear brothers and sisters, you must know that this gospel I proclaim is not a human thing. Nothing that people invented or thought up. And why? Because I did not learn it or receive it from a human being. *I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ, the Messiah*. Directly from him in person.

My Story and Conversion: From Persecutor of the Messiah to His Messenger 1:11-16

You have certainly heard about my life as a Jew and Pharisee. I persecuted the assembly of God, his holy ones, to the utmost and destroyed it. I left nothing undone to attack it and destroy it. Altogether I had made a career in Judaism. I received much more recognition and approval than my contemporaries. My name was respected everywhere. I had the reputation of being a man of zeal, a zealot who took the traditions of the fathers extremely seriously. Whatever the cost. I was a man of zeal like the priest Phinehas back then, Eleazar's son, who killed the Israelite fornicator and the Midianite woman before everyone's eyes. See Numbers 25.

But God stopped me at the height of my zeal. On the road to Damascus. There, too, I wanted to wipe out the assemblies of the Christians. I can explain it only by the fact that God already had me in view from my conception and appointed me for the service of the gospel. By grace. Completely undeserved. God stopped me by revealing his Son, the Messiah, in me. Before my inner eyes. In my heart and mind his Son, the Messiah, suddenly appeared. He stood facing me, in the brightest light. He spoke to me. His words ended at one stroke my hostility and my zeal to harass the assembly of God. *I was to become exactly the opposite: A messenger of his gospel. And that for the nations, the goyim, the peoples, the non-Jews and idol worshipers.*

Paul's Gospel Is Not from Jerusalem, but Straight from Heaven, from the Messiah 1:17-24

What did I do after this drastic experience? I did not do what one would naturally have done or expected. Namely, to go to *Jerusalem*. To the apostles and the first church, to explain myself there and receive instructions for the next steps.

I went from Damascus immediately to *Arabia*. Like Elijah once, who after his great victory on Carmel fled in fear from Jezebel. Very far, all the way to Mount Horeb, to meet God there. I sought his presence – in seclusion and silence. My innermost being had to be cleared out, reshaped and renewed. For the insane zeal had hardened me so much that God himself had to transform and heal me. The gospel of the glory of Christ as well as the reach of grace was revealed to me there in all its glorious details. I found the Christ as I had not yet known him! The Scriptures and the Torah prophesy about him and bear witness to him. This Christ I also proclaimed in Arabia.

From there I went back to *Damascus*, where God had opened my eyes and healed my blindness after my encounter with the Messiah. Only then, three years after my conversion, did I go to *Jerusalem* for the first time. I wanted to meet *Peter*, the first of the apostles. I was able to get to know him over a period of 15 days. We talked nonstop. By now I had thousands of questions about the Messiah, whom Peter, after all, knew from close up. I did not meet any other of the twelve apostles. But I did meet one more who had known the Messiah even longer than Peter, namely James, his brother. Although not an apostle like the Twelve, he was a leader of the Jerusalem church of disciples.

Everything I am writing to you is the truth!

After that, when I had left Jerusalem, I came to the regions of *Syria and Cilicia. To my old homeland.*

I was not personally known to the chosen ones in Judea, the holy ones in Christ. My stay in Jerusalem was too short. They had only heard this: Our former persecutor and tormentor now proclaims and spreads faith in the Messiah Jesus. This faith he once wanted to wipe out along with us. And they

praised God for it, who had done such a miracle of conversion and new creation in me.

The Second Time in Jerusalem, with Peter, James and John 2:1-10

Only 14 years later did I go up to *Jerusalem* a second time. Together with *Barnabas*. We took young *Titus* along, who was a faithful helper to us. The idea of going to Jerusalem did not come from me. It was revealed to me from above that I should go.

There I laid before them the *gospel* that I had received from Christ, in order to proclaim it to the Jews and nations. I did this above all before the respected ones, the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, so that my visit would not be in vain.

Titus, a Greek by birth and uncircumcised, was not forced into *circumcision* in Jerusalem either. Neither by the apostles nor by James.

But there were some who tried. For at the time of the *Apostolic Council*, *pseudo-brothers had slipped in* among the crowd of brothers. False brothers who had only one thing in mind: They wanted to spy out our freedom not to be circumcised. They lay in wait for us, to find out whether Titus was circumcised, in order then to force him to do it. In this way, in keeping with their false idea of piety, they wanted to bring us under the yoke and burden of the law.

When they finally found out that Titus was not circumcised, they demanded it. Which was to be expected. But we strictly contradicted their demand and rejected it. For *it is about the truth, the core of the gospel*. That is what we defended. For you in Galatia too. The gospel does not demand circumcision and observance of the law.

The assembled leaders, the so-called respected ones, to whom I had presented my gospel, did not impose any further demand on me. Certainly not that I should observe and teach circumcision.

For they recognized that the gospel for the nations, the uncircumcised, had been entrusted to me. And in the same way that Peter had been called to proclaim the gospel to the Jews, the circumcised. For the same God who was at work through Peter for the Jews, in Judea, worked just the same through me among the nations.

When James, the brother of the Lord, and the two apostles Peter and John saw the grace that had been given to me, they gave me the *right hand of fellowship*. With a handshake they confirmed to me and Barnabas that service among the nations was our calling. Just as they serve the Jews. The leaders *in Jerusalem recognized my ministry and my apostleship*. So they did not demand that we push the uncircumcised to be circumcised. Their only demand was that we should not forget the poor. Nothing else. And of course we gladly kept to that.

Peter with Paul in Antioch – Breaking Table Fellowship Destroys the Heart of the Gospel 2:11-14

Some time later Cephas, that is, the apostle *Peter*, came to Antioch, where Barnabas and I were staying. There it came to an *open clash*. For I opposed him publicly and decisively. By his behavior he condemned himself. This is what had happened: We were together with several brothers and sisters at a shared meal. Peter was there too. When some people from Jerusalem arrived from James, the brother of the Lord, he suddenly separated himself from the table fellowship that we had with the Christians from the nations. For he was afraid of these arriving brothers from the circumcision, who for legal and traditional reasons refused table fellowship with the uncircumcised. Suddenly the other Jews also followed him out of the table fellowship and joined him. Even my closest confidant and fellow fighter Barnabas, a Levite, was carried away by this hypocrisy, to my disappointment. They acted as if they had no table fellowship with the Christians from the nations. Out of fear of people, the circumcised Jews separated themselves from their uncircumcised fellow brothers from the nations and *thereby denied the truth of the gospel*. Namely the truth that *God accepts the nations as his people*, without circumcision, without the law of Moses and without the Jewish traditions. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I confronted Peter face to face and addressed this scandal publicly. After all, we had just settled once and for all in Jerusalem the question of whether the disciples from the nations must keep the law of Moses. No, the nations did not have to keep the law. In front of everyone present I said to him: You are a Jew and live like the nations, by having table fellowship with them here. Now that you separate yourself from them and keep to your Jewish brothers in the faith, you force the nations to live according to the Jewish traditions. *They must understand your behavior to mean that you have to live like a Jew in order to belong to God's people*. That is your message without words to the Christians from the nations. Your behavior sends a signal! A false one.

Justification Comes for All Solely by Faith in Christ 2:15-18

We, Peter, Paul, Israel, are Jews by birth and therefore God's chosen people. We are not sinners like the nations, without the law, without God's election. But in the end that does us no good at all. The gospel says something else. We know, after all, that a person is not declared righteous by God on the basis of works of the law or the Jewish way of life. That happens solely and only through faith in Jesus Christ. We too, just like the nations, have believed in the Messiah, so that we are justified precisely through this faith – and not through works of the law like circumcision. Only in this way do we belong to God's people. *The gospel is clear and uncompromising: By observing the law of Moses, that is, by works of the law, no human being on the whole earth will ever be able to be justified. Or reconciled with God.* Not on the basis of Jewish or Pharisaic piety either. Our relationship with God, our connection with him, is set right and established by faith alone.

If we Jews do everything we can to be justified in Christ, then it is clear that we are no better. Even as circumcised people and as those who have the law. So if we are justified without the law, does the law no longer matter to us? Or do good and evil no longer matter then? Absolutely not! Never ever.

I have left the law and its demands behind, yes, torn down the whole system of the law. I will explain in a moment how that happened. But if I were now to build it up again (as happened in Antioch when the brothers came from Jerusalem and the Jewish Christians separated themselves from the other Christians), then I would be a transgressor. I would be disregarding the law of Christ and his gospel.

The Gospel: God's Grace, the Love of Christ, His Cross and Faith 2:19-21

I, Paul the Jew, have “died” through the righteous demand of the law. The law, as it were, drove me into death. It demanded my death, since I am a transgressor of the law. I can’t keep it. Certainly not in full. That is why “I died.” I have, so to speak, died to the law, its demands and its righteous and condemning curse. But a miracle, an exchange has taken place: I now live for God! I am free to live for God and to obey him. How can that be? How is it to be explained, since I am still alive and writing this letter? The reason is: *I have been “crucified” with Christ.* That means spiritually identified with Christ in his dying: His death on the cross is my death. At the cross of Christ my old, unredeemed life as a transgressor and sinner was ended. *In his death* for me. God made that possible. He has, as it were, credited Jesus’ death and resurrection to me as if it had actually been my own crucifixion *and* resurrection.

Now I live for God – but not as the old Saul – it is Christ, the Risen One, who lives in me! *He is my new existence.* He determines my new being. He is the power of my life as one who has been acquitted and justified.

My existence in my weak, battered and mortal body I live in faith. In firm trust in the Son of God. Only he has earned my trust. *On him alone I stake my life, for he loved me. Only he loved me so unconditionally and gave himself for me, for my benefit and in my place, even to death.* Imagine, you and me, all of us, he loved unconditionally at the cost of his life. Yes, he died because of us – and for us.

I will not nullify the grace of God, which we already recognize in the old covenant and also in the law. But if righteousness that counts before God, that saves us and gives new life, were possible through works of the law, then Christ died for nothing. His terrible death on the cross would have been for nothing. Then there would be no gospel. *So the grace of God in Christ is our only chance to do justice to God’s will. Here the law reveals its powerlessness: It cannot redeem! It cannot even help us to be redeemed.*

God Gives Himself to the Non-Jewish Galatians (Gauls) in the Crucified Christ – Not in the Law 3:1-5

You naive Galatians, you are like people hypnotized. As if you were no longer yourselves! I brought you Jesus, the Savior, didn't I? *I painted him before your eyes as the Crucified One – him who died for us. Through his sacrifice he made everything right and covered our sin.* I could not have brought you anything better. That is how graciously God met you. And you received him gratefully in faith.

That is why I want to know one thing from you: What was the reason you received the Spirit of God? Remember! Was it because of your good works and your faithfulness to the law? Or was it because you believed what I proclaimed to you? Don't be so naive. *You began following Jesus in faith through the Holy Spirit. And now you want to go on and reach the goal in your own strength and by keeping the law?* Do you really want to fall back into the fleshly, into outward forms of religiosity? Did you experience the magnificent gift of faith and the knowledge of the Messiah for nothing? I cannot even bear to imagine that everything, including your sufferings for the sake of the gospel, was in vain. That is how it would be if you now carry on with the law and circumcision.

It is God who gives you everything! Who supplies you with his Spirit and works miracles among you. He is the one who gives blessed changes in your lives, in families and churches. What do you think is the reason for that? Your impressive piety, perhaps? Because you keep the law? Have yourselves circumcised? You weren't Jews at all! And you had nothing to do with the law when you believed the gospel! *Your faith in the gospel alone, in the crucified and risen Christ, changed everything. Through it forgiveness, peace and life were brought to you. Through the Holy Spirit in you.* That has not changed now, has it? Your legalism cannot earn you God's blessing and destroys this knowledge! It all remains God's gift of grace on the basis of your faith.

Abraham Was Justified by Faith – Whose Sons and Daughters We Are, by Faith Alone 3:6-9

Just like you, Abraham already believed God. A long time ago. He came from the nations – like you. He is the forefather of Israel and of the Jews. God justified him on the basis of his faith. Without the law! For it did not even exist yet. Without circumcision. For that came only later. Faith was what counted. God's verdict on Abraham reads: Abraham is righteous, he stands in the right relationship to me, because he trusts me unconditionally. Just as you were changed in your hearts, so Abraham experienced it too. What exactly was it about back then? Abraham was frustrated at having no offspring in his old age. Scripture reports in Genesis 15:

“After these events the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: Do not be afraid, Abram, I myself am your shield; your reward will be very great. 2 Abram answered: Lord and God, what can you give me? I am going on childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus. 3 And Abram said: Look, you have given me no offspring; so my house slave will be my heir. 4 But look, the word of the Lord came to him: Not he will be your heir, *but your own son will be your heir.* 5 He took him outside and said: Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can count them! And he said to him: *So numerous will your offspring be.* 6 *And he believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*”

He trusted God unconditionally. He gave God's working in history room and, against all reason and human expectation, let himself fall into God's arms with a primal trust. Believing like this is the standard and the model. By this you can recognize: *All who believe as he did are sons and daughters of Abraham.*

In Scripture God announced to Abraham that one day the nations would be justified by faith. For he said to him: *In you all nations will be blessed.*

That is why all who believe like Abraham will be blessed. Then you belong to Abraham's countless descendants.

The Law Brings the Curse, Faith the Acquittal – Christ Bears the Curse on the Cross 3:10–14

In contrast to this stands: All who turn to the law, all who want to be righteous by the law, place themselves under the *curse of the law*. For God's words are clear: Everyone who does not continue *in everything* written in the law and do what it demands is cursed. Every single commandment of the law must be kept. You can't simply pick out one commandment.

On the basis of the law, that is, on the basis of works of the law, no one is declared righteous. Neither back then nor today! Holy Scripture says – although the Old Testament with its law had long existed –: *The righteous will live by faith in me*. Unshakable trust in Christ and faithfulness to Christ means that Christ is my life. The one who is righteous by faith will live! *Living by faith!*

The principle of the law is not and never will be faith, but doing, religious performance. It says, whoever does these things will live. *The person of the law has to deliver; he gets nothing for free*. The law knows no grace. Whoever gets involved with the law is obligated to fulfill it completely! There is no compromise, no mixing, no middle way. The law and faith in Christ do not go together.

For the person of faith this applies: But Christ has redeemed us by his death on the cross from the deadly curse of the broken law. We have transgressed it and have by no means fulfilled it 100%. We only go free, and we can only live, through an advocate, through a mediator or defender. Through a righteous one who stands up for us, who takes upon himself what we deserved. And Jesus did the incomprehensible: *He became a curse for us!* For Scripture says in Deuteronomy 21:23: Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree. On the wood of the cross the dying Messiah, the guiltless and righteous one, became the deadly curse in our place. Crucified to death by evil people. So we have been bought free at the price of his life! That applies to all – the Jews and the nations who try to become righteous before God with the law. You Galatians too, who have had yourselves circumcised, are set free from the curse by Christ.

The unique ransom from the deserved curse clears the way for the promise to Abraham: Through the crucified, raised and exalted Messiah Jesus, the blessing that was promised to Abraham now becomes tangible reality for all

nations. In Christ it comes to all peoples. So that all of us, Jews and nations, might receive the *promise*. The *Holy Spirit*. That is what the prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel and Zechariah had foretold. The Spirit of new life. The Spirit of power. And the Spirit of freedom that blows in God's new world – the breath of the new creation.

God's Promise Stands and Surpasses the Law of Moses, Which Does Not Annul the Promises 3:15-18

Brothers and sisters, I am speaking in a way that can be clearly understood: When someone has made a will or a covenant that has taken legal effect, there is nothing that can declare it invalid. Not even an added clause can change its legal force.

Abraham received the promise from God. For his offspring it was like a valid and incontestable will. Here it is important to me to point out that the promise, strictly speaking, was not made to the many descendants, that is, only to Abraham's direct descendants and immediate blood relatives, to whom you Galatians do not belong. No, only to one descendant, a single seed. One person. And do you know who that is? *That is Christ*. For by no means were all the promises fulfilled in Isaac.

With this I want to tell you: A will that God made to Abraham is not dissolved by the law of Moses that came 430 years later. No, the promise, God's pledge and promise of blessing for all peoples, remains in force. If this inheritance that God promised to Abraham came from the law, then it is no longer a promise. Once again: God gave it to Abraham through a promise. It is God's pledge to him alone.

The Meaning, the Goal and the End of the Law 3:19-24

Now one rightly asks what significance the law still has, then. Why was it given? What is the use of the Torah? The Torah is an indescribable blessing for God's people. For it shows *what God is like*. Above all, also what good he wants to do to protect his people from the mistakes of other peoples who do not know God. The Torah was a *protective shield for his people*. For the behavior of his people needed rules – and sanctions. The Torah makes violations of the commandments recognizable. It warns. And it sanctions transgressions. It also shows plainly, if one is only willing to see it, that we are all transgressors of God's will. We can never keep God's commandments fully and completely.

But it was given only for a limited time – until *the descendant* came into the world for whom God's promise was intended.

The law, the Torah, was given to the people of Israel by order of angels. Mediated through Moses. But the promise was quite different. Abraham received it directly from God. Just as I received my apostolic office and my gospel directly from God. Without a mediator. The one true God in person guaranteed to Abraham what has now been fulfilled in Christ.

Could one now conclude from this that the law somehow competes with the promise? No, by no means. And if it did, then only on this condition: If it were a law that could really give life, then righteousness would come from keeping the law. Then – only then – would the law be a way to life and an alternative to God's unconditional promise.

But what does one see in Scripture? That all, Jews and nations, do not do what the law demands. They are exposed as transgressors who are at the mercy of the power of sin. Sinfulness was unmistakably brought to light by the law. This makes it clear to all that they urgently need the promise. And that they can actually receive it: Namely faith in Jesus Christ. *The age-old promise is given only to those who believe!*

Before this faith in Christ was possible, we were, so to speak, in the school of the law. Under the supervision and protection of the law. With the goal of one day being able to believe. Then, when this faith would be revealed. The way of faith would then finally end our captivity and our being guarded under the law.

The law has, as it were, become our guardian and tutor: On the one hand it protected us. On the other hand it also shows how much we need Christ – the Liberator, who makes us righteous through faith and gives us a reconciled relationship with God.

The Liberator Makes Us Sons of God through Faith and Unites All without Distinction in Christ 3:25-29

And that, thank God, is how it turned out. When faith in the Messiah came and he entered our lives, we left the guardian behind. The time under the law is over. Its purpose has been fulfilled, after all. All of you are now no longer minors and pupils under the guardian. No! *Through faith you are now grown-up sons and daughters of God, of full age!* You have come home! To the Father's heart. Into his arms. He protects you now, no longer the guardian, the law.

Remember the first days when you came to faith. What happened back then? You were baptized into the Lord Jesus Christ! Many saw how you were plunged under the water and came up again. And there you *clothed yourselves with Christ. Like a garment.* He is now what your life is all about. You belong to him now. You are now known as Christians. People recognize the Messiah in your lives. In each individual, but also in you together. In a moment I will come to how Christ can be recognized in you.

The transient worldly orders and distinctions, the religious, social and societal boundaries and discriminations – you have left them all behind, every one of them. For all of you who in baptism called on the Messiah and made him your Lord have become one in him. A unity in which there is no longer any difference between people. Dignity, sex, rank, status, race, caste or class no longer have any significance in Christ. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, nor male and female. *For God and in Christ we are all one.*

So if you are joined in this way with Christ, the one descendant of Abraham, then you have indeed become Abraham's seed. And you come into the promised inheritance, namely the blessing of Abraham: righteousness by faith, God's fatherhood, as well as being heirs of the new creation. Once again: It is not circumcision that makes you sons of Abraham – it is the salvation in Jesus Christ alone.

From the Law to Sons and Daughters of God: The End of All Religion 4:1-7

As long as the heir is a minor and not of age or grown up, in the culture and social order of that time he is no different from a slave or serf. And that, even though he – waiting in the wings, as it were – is the heir and future lord of all the property. But until he comes of age, he is under his guardian and steward. Until the point in time comes that the father has set.

In just the same way we Jews too were subject to the elements of the world, namely the law, like serfs and slaves. Yes, imprisoned in it. Held fast in something that belongs to this transient, fallen world and is beneath the honor and dignity of sonship, which connects us directly with the Father.

But then came the point in time set by the heavenly Father. Set “from above,” so to speak: *When the time had fully come, God sent us his Son.* When what had been promised was fulfilled and the end of the time of the law was near. Sent from heaven, he gave up all glory. Born of an ordinary woman. Fully human. A real Jew. Born under the law of Moses, which he completely fulfilled. So that he might buy free those who were under the law and its guardianship and who lived under the threat of the deadly curse. In this way he led them out into the full status of sons and heirs. As in a new exodus: The old has gone. The new has come. We are now finally sons and daughters of God. Adopted. From underage children under the protection of the law of Moses, we have become grown-up and free sons and daughters of the Father. His intervention made it possible. The Son became human so that we humans might become sons and daughters of the Father.

Because you are now all sons and daughters of the Eternal One, he has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts. He has given us the place of his Son, yes, beside Jesus. This Spirit calls and prays and pleads together with our spirit. From our hearts, from our innermost being. From our whole being flow the incomprehensible words that only true children of God can say: *Abba, dear Father!* This Spirit, Christ in us, changes our hearts to a deep trust in God. It is precisely when we expect everything from him that we please our Father. Just like Jesus, who prayed these words in great distress.

So pay attention and realize who you have become through grace and faith: You are no longer underage serfs of the law of Moses. You are sons and daughters of God! And therefore heirs with Abraham. Through the Messiah, our Lord Jesus. You have now arrived where the Father always wanted to have you.

Do You Want to Be Slaves Again? You Are Gambling Away Your Freedom and Risking Everything! 4:8-11

Just remember the time when you did not know this Father God. You had subjected yourselves to idols. You thought they were gods. But they were nothings. They were made with hands. Now you have come to know the only true and living God. Yes, it was he, after all, who first knew you. And called you to himself and accepted you as his children and heirs. All the more the question: How can you, of all times now, want to go back to the old life with its miserable and weak elements and religious ideas? You cannot be spiritually grown-up sons and daughters and heirs there. Do you really want to follow these ideas and the religious customs that ended in Jesus all over again? Now you observe certain holidays, months, festival seasons and years. Even though you are not Jews at all. Anxiously you align your lives with the Jewish festival calendar. But that is how people live who are not of age. Like small children who are not grown up. None of that did I bring you. *That is not the message of the gospel that makes you grown-up sons and daughters of God.* Heirs of the promise. I am very much afraid that all my effort with you was in vain.

How Could This Happen after That Encounter? 4:12-20

Dear brothers and sisters, we get along well, don't we? I beg you, we belong together for Jesus' sake. Do you remember how I came to you? I was in bad physical condition. I was pretty much at the end of my strength. After a long march on foot over the Taurus Mountains I was completely exhausted. In this wretched condition I proclaimed the gospel to you, the good news. And you? You neither despised me for it nor spat on the ground in disgust at me. That is what one might have expected. But you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God. Even more, as if I were Jesus Christ in person.

You were so happy about it. *Back then you were surprised and overwhelmed with joy. But where has it gone?* You were so moved that you would have torn out your eyes for me to give them to me.

Do you really think I have suddenly become your enemy because I am criticizing you now and writing you the truth? These people who preach circumcision to you so that you become sons and daughters of God do not have good intentions. They want to make you dependent on them. Not on Christ. You are to be their trophy. You are to regard me, Paul, as an enemy. But for them you are to toil eagerly. Yes, it is commendable to work hard for what is good. Your zeal also shows when I am absent. Or do you then perhaps defect to the other side? Always live as grown-up sons and daughters of God in the freedom of the gospel! Toward these people too!

My children, I feel as if I had to bring you into the world a second time with painful labor pains. *So that Christ may be born in you.* That is how it was the first time I was with you, too. Christ alone – and not circumcision or the law or religious forms – is to take shape in your hearts and lives. You had such a good start. What I would give to be with you again now! And to win you anew for Christ and his freedom, face to face, with the right words. A letter sometimes sounds harsh and impersonal. I am pretty much at a loss about your relapse into the bondage of religiosity.

Two Women and Sons of Abraham; Two Covenants, Two Mountains and Jerusalem Twice 4:21-31

You Galatians, who want to live under the law like the Jews – although you are not Jews – don't you hear the law? In the first book Moses reports an incident about Abraham that illustrates very well what you have gotten involved in. Abraham had two sons. The one he had by his slave woman. The other by his wife, who was not a slave but a free woman. The son of the slave woman was conceived without faith, in human strength and effort. The other came into the world – contrary to all human expectation or possibility – through God's promise and pledge. For us the two women have a figurative, a typological meaning. Just compare them. Each of the two women stands for a covenant that was officially made. The one from *Mount Sinai*, where one is born into the slavery of the law. The slave woman *Hagar* stands for that. For the mountain of the giving of the law in Arabia. That corresponds to the present *Jerusalem* and stands for the people of Israel. This Jerusalem, where the Messiah was crucified, is with her children in the slavery of the law of Moses.

But there is another Jerusalem – the one above, the *heavenly Jerusalem*. This heavenly city is the epitome of everything that comes from above, namely Christ, the Spirit, his kingdom, as well as God's visible presence in the new world. This Jerusalem is free, like Abraham's wife. She is our mother. That is what the great prophet Isaiah already said in chapter 54: "Rejoice, you barren one, who never brought a child into the world; burst into jubilation and shout for joy, you who never became a mother! For the children of the lonely one will be more numerous than the children of the woman who has a husband."

You Christians in Galatia, all of you, like Isaac, are children of the promise! Born to freedom, in order to be heirs.

Back then the one born naturally, Ishmael, persecuted the one born according to the Spirit. And that is what I experience all the time. It is the Jews who stir up persecutions. Because they reject the crucified Messiah, who came for the nations too.

But what does Scripture say about this situation? There was no compromise. And so it is to be today: Drive the slave woman and her son out of the camp!

Cast them out. For the son of the slave woman shall not share the inheritance with the son of the free woman, Sarah.

Ishmael stands for a relationship with God that is built on subjection and one's own performance. Isaac stands for the living relationship of sonship, the core of the gospel, which has made us sons and daughters of the loving Father.

Let me sum up, dear brothers and sisters: We are not children of the slave woman, but children of the free woman. Realize what that means for you and how decisive the difference is.

Either – Or: The Whole Law, or Christ, Grace and Freedom 5:1-12

Christ came for us. He brought freedom. He came to set us free. And he did it. Remain in this *Christ-freedom*. Do not let yourselves be pulled back into slavery. Resist and stand firm. I, Paul, tell you: If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no use to you. Christ and his liberation have nothing to do with the law you want to fulfill. It does not help you, indeed, it cannot help you if you want to do the law. By the way, if you let yourselves be circumcised in order to become sons and heirs, then you must keep the *whole* law. Then circumcision is not nearly enough. Circumcision comes with a life under the whole law. Do not be deceived. There is no cheap legalism. The law demands more than circumcision!

Do you know how far this goes? Your connection to Christ, the Messiah, is cut off and severed if you want to be made righteous by the law. Then you have *fallen out of the grace of God*. As if out of a lifeboat. The grace that saved you and made you righteous, in which we live, then no longer applies to you. But why is his free grace not enough for you? Why do you want to rely on yourselves?

We have received God's liberating and enlightening Spirit, after all! By his power we believe. Through him we await the hope of righteousness. That is the completion of salvation. We look forward joyfully to the day when everything will be revealed and our justification, the whole salvation in Jesus, will become visible. That is why it should become clear to everyone: In the Messiah it makes no difference whether one is circumcised or not. For followers of Christ neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything. There is nothing about it that pleases God. Only faith, the saving relationship with Jesus, counts. Only unconditional trust in what God has done in Christ and is doing today brings us into the right relationship with God. And how does this faith become visible? Through active and selfless love for one another. By this you can recognize the faith that makes you righteous and makes you sons of God.

You started so well and were making such good progress in faith. Who has now stopped you and slowed you down from continuing to follow the truth of the gospel? This persuasion does not come from the one who calls you to faith.

There is a striking comparison to your situation when you lend your ear to these teachers of the law: A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.

I am confident about you in the Lord Jesus Christ that you will see it the same way. Those who confuse you and drive you into legalism will have to answer for what they do in God's judgment. And receive their verdict. They will not get away as if nothing had happened.

If I really preach circumcision, as is claimed in my absence, why am I still persecuted by the Jews? Just think about it! Then the offense and scandal of the cross that I proclaim would no longer be a reason to persecute me. No, I do not preach or demand circumcision. That would never cross my mind.

As far as I am concerned, those who are unsettling you might as well go ahead and emasculate themselves. Then, according to the law (Deuteronomy 23:1), they would no longer belong to Israel, to God's people, at all.

Live in the Selfless Freedom and Fruit of God's Spirit 5:13-24

I say it once again: Brothers and sisters, you have been called to freedom. Both out of the slavery of selfishness and idolatry and out of that of the law of Moses! *Your freedom is God's will.*

But do not misunderstand this freedom, as if you could now finally fulfill yourselves in selfishness at the expense of others. Or push your way through without consideration for your neighbor. For freedom consists in this: that you are now free to serve one another in love. Then you would even fulfill what is essential and most important in the law of Moses. *For it is fulfilled in one word: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

If the commandment of circumcision is more important to you than what the law really values, then watch out that you do not tear each other to pieces and devour one another. With all your quarrels among yourselves, including between circumcised and uncircumcised, that could happen.

Live in the freedom and the power of the Holy Spirit. After all, you received him on the basis of your faith. He helps you, in your dealings with one another, not to follow the desires of your old life, when you did not know Christ. The Spirit of God, yes, God's personal presence, has come into your lives and overcomes the old, fleshly, natural and sinful behavior. Circumcision does not help you to put off your unredeemed behavior. If anything, it is about the *circumcision of your heart*. That is important and happens through God's Spirit.

The old, fleshly and sinful nature does not want to give God's Spirit in you any room. It wants to fulfill itself and get its own way. But God's Spirit in us has taken up the fight and wants to bring forth the nature of Christ in us. So be aware that the conflict between "*Spirit and flesh*," between the old and the new life, is part of your life. To the very end. In you personally, but also, above all, among yourselves. Each side wants to prevent you from doing what the other side wants. So do not let yourselves go, do not follow your sinful inclinations, but pay attention to what God wants to work in you.

If you are motivated and inspired by God's Spirit, if he has the leadership and rule over your life, then you are not under the law. Then you live as free sons and daughters of God by

faith – in fellowship with ABBA, your Father.

The Works of the Flesh

So that you really understand what I mean by “flesh,” its desires and inclinations, I will now list some works of the flesh. They are by no means all of them. They damage and destroy you, your churches and your relationships with all people. Examine your own life to see whether works of selfishness have become a habit there. And whether you tolerate them and leniently excuse yourselves. Rather, drive them out of your life, put a stop to them, renounce them and bring them to the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

First I name sexual sins. They are widespread. When they are acted out unrestrained and without any standard, their destructive effect attacks all people, men and women, young and old, who give themselves over to unbridled sexuality. Whether in thoughts, in attitudes or in deeds. Now in detail:

Sexual immorality: (Greek *porneia*) – fornication, *any* sexual activity outside marriage, unfaithfulness to one’s spouse.

Impurity: what is perverse and filthy; shameless practices in the sexual sphere, inside or outside marriage; e.g., degrading a woman to a mere object of lust.

Debauchery: excess, licentiousness and sexual abuse.

Idolatry: worshiping what is created instead of the Creator. Everything that pushes God and his will out of first place in life. The first of the Ten Commandments warns against this. Idol worship, from which the Galatians had been set free.

Magic potions: (Greek *pharmakeia*) taking mind-altering drugs in the realm of magic, witchcraft, occultism and spiritism. Taking drugs to cope with life, as an escape from reality, with all the consequences that damage health and destroy lives.

Hatred: turning away from and hating people and ethnic groups.

Discord: strife, quarreling, a contentious spirit.

Jealousy: a form of envy, selfish behavior intent on one’s own advantage, suspicions and pronounced fears of loss.

Fits of rage: violent outbursts of anger, unbridled attacks on people and things, often over trifles.

Selfish ambition: a malicious tendency toward quarrels and intrigues.

Dissensions: loss of unity. As a result: scattering, rifts, feuds.

Factions and sects: sectarian thinking, promoting and overemphasizing special doctrines or legalistic demands, forming exclusive and narrow groups that wall themselves off.

Envy: the habit of begrudging others anything good and preferring to have it oneself.

Murder: the worst attack on the sovereign domain of God, who created human beings.

Drunkenness: excessive consumption of alcohol, states of intoxication.

Orgies: a sinful lifestyle of drinking binges and gorging, gluttony, carousing.

Etc.

Dear Galatians, I have already said it, and I repeat my warning: Those in the churches, also among you, who do such things out of habit and do not want to admit that they are sins will have ***no inheritance in the eternal kingdom of God.*** It is then also completely meaningless to think that being circumcised would secure the eternal inheritance for me. The way of the “flesh” never ends in God’s kingdom!

The Fruit of the Spirit

Quite different is what God, the Holy Spirit, wants to bring forth in you. His own nature is to become visible in you. So choose a life that bears good fruit, which grows only through the Spirit in faith:

1. Love: God's self-sacrificing love, which is not a feeling but a decision of the will. Without love for God and people, everything is worthless, in Christian life too (1 Corinthians 13). We love because he first loved us. And in this way we also fulfill the law of Moses. The holy love of God is the greatest and most important thing of all, and that is why I name it first.

2. Joy: genuine, deep, robust joy about what God is for us and has done with us and with others, what he is doing now and what he will do according to his promise; joy that is also experienced together and does not depend on outward circumstances (poverty, persecution, illness, suffering).

3. Peace: (Hebrew shalom) not only the absence of strife, but reconciliation, warm-hearted togetherness, closeness, wholeness, reaching out to one another.

4. Forbearance: patience and magnanimity in dealing with others; a lasting readiness to bear with fellow human beings and circumstances; love in its passive but persistent side. You don't have to pull on the grass to make it grow.

5. Kindness: a benevolent, always helpful and understanding attitude, a gentle nature, generosity; the active side of love.

6. Goodness: warm-hearted goodness, similar to kindness; giving others what is right and good; doing good.

7. Faithfulness: (faith) – loyalty; the virtue of reliability, sincerity, imitating God, who always stands by his word and is faithful to his promises.

8. Gentleness: mildness, the opposite of selfishness, excessive demands and overestimating oneself; humility regarding oneself in awareness of one's weaknesses and sin, compassion for the problems and weaknesses of others.

9. Self-control: self-mastery, self-discipline and self-restraint, balance, living with moderation and a sense of proportion.

When these things are found in you, then you can be sure that you are not breaking any law. Nothing of this fruit is forbidden. On the contrary: The law neither demands these traits nor produces them. *All these fruits, the one fruit, are*

summed up in one word: Jesus Christ. He lives in you through his Spirit. So leave your life to him alone.

Those who belong to Jesus Christ, who trust him, did something decisive when they came to faith: They brought their old life, the flesh with its sinful passions and destructive desires, to the *cross of Jesus Christ*. They consciously turned away from their old, sinful life toward the cross, toward Jesus Christ. This old life deserved nothing but the cross. In Jesus' substitutionary death for us it was condemned and thereby ended. It died in the death of Jesus. You have accepted this death sentence of the cross for yourselves. Living out of the old nature and for the old nature (flesh) is a thing of the past for you.

Sowing to the Spirit: Being There for One Another, Living Love, Being Generous, Not Being Full of Oneself 5:25-6:10

God's Spirit has given us new life. He has made us a new creation. Our being is new. It is in God's hand. So live accordingly now too. Follow the Spirit! His track! Together, in unity with one another. *Live the life of the future already now, in the here and now.*

Let us stop seeking vain glory and honor from one another and in front of one another. Let us finally stop provoking and challenging one another! Let us stop envying one another! All of that has found its end at the cross, after all!

Dear brothers and sisters, anyone can take a *misstep* and stumble. Anyone can be caught off guard by a sin or transgression. Anyone can at some point chase after a wrong view of what is supposed to be pious or God-fearing. But you who are spiritual, who live the life of the Spirit, and see your neighbors stumble, help them up again. By setting them right and correcting them. Point out their misstep to them. Especially when they do not notice it themselves. Help them back onto the track of the Spirit. But with gentleness, carefully, not as condescending or arrogant critics. The same thing can happen to all of you, after all. Be alert! You are exposed to the same temptations and are also in danger of falling and stumbling. In doing so, examine yourselves self-critically with regard to your own sins and mistakes. There is probably no one to whom such a thing has not already happened. *That is exactly when we need one another!*

Let us carry burdens for one another, just as Christ willingly carried the cross and our sins. The burden of our weakness and our constant susceptibility to temptation. The church is also a gathering of people who still sin. And it is constantly threatened by sin. There are also burdens where you should stand by one another and help carry them: illness, financial difficulties, persecution, loneliness, fear, despair, being overloaded and much more.

In this way you fulfill the law. *The law of Christ!* Passivity, lack of interest in one's neighbor and inactivity do not come from the Spirit of God. Saying "no time," "not interested" or "It makes no sense" or "that's hopeless," etc., is not an option in the marching order of the Spirit. Despite mistakes and sins we will

go on loving one another! Our faith works and proves itself precisely in active love, after all.

If anyone thinks he is something special, or flawless, or someone who does not need the other, he deceives himself. That is why each one should examine himself and see what he accomplishes. *And that before God.* Not by comparing himself with others. God is the only standard; he knows our hearts. That is the best protection against self-deception or self-exaltation. Then one can boast of one's deeds, if one still wants to then. Each one will be responsible for himself on that day when we stand before God.

Everyone has his task and duty in the church, which cannot simply be pushed off onto others. *Life in the Spirit is always a life in community!*

Sowing and Reaping

Support those who give you good instruction and teaching. Not only with words, but in deed and with financial means. Do not be surprised that there can be no intensive and good instruction in the gospel if you, who receive spiritual things, are not also willing to give material things in return. *Support your teachers, leaders and shepherds!*

Don't ever think that it doesn't matter how you behave toward one another. Make no mistake, you can't fool God. The *natural principle of sowing and reaping* applies to everyone. *What a person sows, that he will one day reap.* Our deeds, our thinking and behavior always have consequences. We will meet them one day. As surely as something grows and comes up out of the seed in the ground. Whoever sows the old, unredeemed things on the field of his life will reap *destruction*. I have just written to you which works of the flesh are meant, which one cannot do without consequences. Whoever invests his life and his resources, his lifetime, energy and money in the countless pleasures and distractions of life for himself will one day conclude that it all perishes.

But whoever sows the Spirit on the field of his life will reap *eternal life* from God and his Spirit. Very soon, in God's new creation, his eternal kingdom. That is why we should do good – it is not in vain. Let us not grow weary, for the time of harvest will come. A great harvest festival awaits us. One that will never end. But we must not stop doing good. Not even when it seems in vain and there is no immediate grateful echo. Therefore, as long as we still have time and opportunities, let us do good to *all people*. Meet all who are in need with the heart of God and open hands, and bless them. Begin in the community of believers, in which you are united with your brothers and sisters in Christ. There you can sow to the Spirit every day.

God's Intervention: The Cross of Golgotha Makes the Difference and Is End and Beginning at Once 6:11-18

I am writing to you in my own hand at the end of my letter, which up to this point I have dictated to a dear brother who writes well. You can tell by the larger letters. In a few words I sum up and get to the point of what I have explained to you in detail.

Those who are pushing you into senseless circumcision only want to look good and successfully accomplish their own willful mission. If they succeed, then they need not fear persecution by their Jewish compatriots because of the cross of Christ. *For them circumcision is more important than the cross of Christ. Their goal is for you to become Jewish.*

Yet these false missionaries, who are circumcised, do not keep the law themselves. They are after the glory of being able to boast about your foreskin. As if they wanted to hold up a scalp and celebrate their victory.

But for me, Paul, only the *glory of the cross* is worth striving for. The cross puts a line through every human craving for recognition. Glory and honor before people and from people do not interest me. The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ is our only hope – yes, the center, the rock on which we stand. For me that means: Done with the world! Done with its religious and legalistic elements and its idolatrous ways of life. My own too, which I once had in Judaism. A new world was born there. Life, not death, is the goal and hope of the cross! The tree of the curse becomes a tree of life for us.

And I myself have died to this old, perishing world on this cross. I no longer belong to it. It can no longer give me anything. It can no longer demand anything. *With the cross there is no going back!*

Being circumcised or not – through the cross that belongs to the past. The cross is the beginning of a new creation. Not what people have to do, but what God did and created. A new being and resting in Christ. The new age has begun. Now only *faith, grace and the liberating law of Christ* count.

All who live by this standard of the *new creation* are under God's blessing, under his peace and his mercy. They are the true Israel of God. Yes, the new

Israel of God, children of Abraham by faith. Circumcision ties you to the old Jerusalem, which is in bondage, to Israel under the law.

Please don't give me any more trouble with your escapades back into Judaism! I bear the marks of persecution on my body. Just as Jesus bore those of his cross. My scars speak a clear language. That of the cross I proclaim.

May the *grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* be present in your thoughts every day. *Build on it, hope in it, live from it.*

Amen.

In Closing

I very much hope that as you read, you have sensed God speaking to you. How he encourages, teaches, but also warns against everything that does not come from him and therefore harms us.

Thank him for all the good things he has said about you and also directly to you.

If you have any questions, write to us: hj-ronsdorf@t-online.de

You can find more texts of the New Testament at www.hans-joerg-ronsdorf.de.

Here are a few more important tips:

Read the Bible. Regularly, if possible.

Read the Bible together with other people – and talk with each other about it.

Pray that God will make his Word come alive for you – as if he were speaking directly to you.

Read the text aloud, twice in a row.

Ask the following questions of the text:

What heading would you give this text?

What does the text say about God and Jesus?

What does the text say about people?

What do we learn from the text?

What should we do?

How does the Word encourage us?

When you meet again, talk about your experiences.

Seek contact and fellowship with Christians who love and honor Jesus Christ and who value, read and take the Bible seriously.