

New Testament History and Literature: Galatians

Author: Dr. Dave Mathewson | Session 19

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Galatians, Paul, Judaizers, Mosaic Law, Justification, Holy Spirit, Greco-Roman Rhetoric, New Covenant, Faith, Apostolic Authority

Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Dave Mathewson examines Paul's Epistle to the Galatians as an urgent persuasive effort to prevent Gentile Christians from adopting the Mosaic Law under the influence of infiltrating Judaizers. He evaluates whether Galatians follows formal Greco-Roman rhetorical defense speech patterns or standard first-century epistolary formats, emphasizing Paul's defense of his divine, independent apostolic authority. Mathewson illustrates how Paul frames the law as a temporary prison guard and disciplinarian superseded by Christ's resurrection and the reception of the New Covenant Holy Spirit. Ultimately, the source demonstrates that believers are justified solely through faith, rendering Old Testament legal observance unnecessary for salvation and Christian life.

Outline

I. Introduction and Context of Galatians

- A. Course context and administrative announcements
 - 1. Upcoming examination schedule
 - 2. Scheduled extra-credit review session
- B. Historical and geographical setting
 - 1. Target audience: Churches in the southern province of Galatia (modern-day Turkey)
 - 2. Church planting background from Paul's missionary journeys
- C. The central crisis: The problem of Judaizers
 - 1. Identity: Jewish Christian group infiltrating Galatian congregations
 - 2. Demands: Mandating Mosaic Law observance (circumcision, Sabbath, dietary rules)
 - 3. Core conflict: Sufficiency of faith in Christ versus requirement of Old Testament law

II. Theological Framework: Two Spheres of Existence

- A. The two-circle contrast model
 - 1. Present evil age: Characterized by sin, death, human weakness ('flesh'), and temporary law
 - 2. New Covenant / Kingdom sphere: Characterized by life, righteousness, faith, and the Holy Spirit
- B. Deliverance through Christ's resurrection

1. Rescue from the present evil age (Galatians 1:4)
2. Inability of the law to overcome sin or impart spiritual life

III. Literary and Rhetorical Structure of Galatians

- A. Evaluation of Greco-Roman rhetorical patterns
 1. Context of ancient speech handbooks (Aristotle et al.) and courtroom speeches
 2. Proposed five-part rhetorical outline:
 - a. Exordium (Galatians 1:6–11): Opening statement of the case and crisis
 - b. Narratio (Galatians 1:12–2:14): Rehearsal of essential historical facts
 - c. Propositio (Galatians 2:15–21): Core thesis and points of agreement
 - d. Probatio (Galatians 3:1–4:31): Systematic presentation of proofs and arguments
 - e. Exhortatio (Galatians 5:1–6:10): Practical commands and ethical guidance
- B. Mathewson's critique of the rhetorical model
 1. Formal structural markers align with standard first-century epistolary conventions
 2. Omission of thanksgiving section reflects Paul's immediate urgency and frustration
 3. Conclusion: Galatians functions as a letter utilizing persuasive elements, not a formal speech

IV. Defense of Paul's Apostolic Authority (Galatians 1–2)

- A. Epistolary introduction (Galatians 1:1–5)
 1. Divine origin of apostleship: Commissioned directly by Christ, not human delegation
 2. Strategic setup: Anticipating the central argument of deliverance from the present age
- B. Autobiographical defense and conversion narrative
 1. Life in Judaism (Galatians 1:13–14): Intense Pharisaic zeal, advancing beyond peers, persecuting Christians
 2. Damascus Road encounter (Galatians 1:15–17): Divine revelation of Christ and direct call to Gentiles
 3. Post-conversion travels: Immediate retreat to Arabia without consulting Jerusalem leaders
- C. The apostolic 'tightrope'
 1. Demonstration of independence: Gospel received entirely apart from human authority
 2. Demonstration of alignment: Endorsement and fellowship from Jerusalem pillars (Peter, James, John)

V. Justification, Law, and Theological Debates (Galatians 2:16–3:29)

- A. Justification by faith versus works of the law
 1. Identification of 'law': Refers specifically to the Mosaic Covenant legislation
 2. Traditional Reformation interpretation (Luther): Rejection of legalism and human self-righteousness
 3. New Perspective on Paul (Sanders, Dunn, Wright): Rejection of Jewish nationalism and boundary markers

4. Mathewson's balanced synthesis: Combining critique of legalistic earning and ethnic exclusivity

B. Imperfection and curse under the law

1. Universal curse for failure to obey all legal commands (Galatians 3:10)
2. Inability of fallen human nature to achieve flawless legal compliance

VI. Arguments Persuading Galatians Against Legal Subjection (Galatians 3–4)

A. Argument from Galatian experience (Galatians 3:1–5)

1. Reception of the Holy Spirit through faith, not legal works
2. Old Testament prophetic background: Spirit as the definitive New Covenant mark (Jeremiah, Ezekiel)

B. Argument from salvation history (Galatians 3:15–18)

1. Priority of Abrahamic Covenant: Promise given 430 years prior to Mosaic Law
2. Permanence of promise: Temporary Mosaic Law cannot void or supersede the Abrahamic promise

C. Argument from cultural metaphors (Galatians 3:23–25)

1. Law as a prison guard (custodian): Confinement preserving God's people until Christ
2. Law as a disciplinarian (paidagogos / babysitter): Temporary guardian overseeing a child until maturity

VII. Conclusion

A. Christian freedom from Mosaic Covenant obligation

1. Eclipse of temporary legal guardian upon the arrival of Christ
2. True identity as God's children established by faith and the New Covenant Spirit

B. Freedom defined as Spirit-led life rather than lawlessness