

Sermon Notes

(A basic transcription with modifications for style and clarity)

AM I SELF-RIGHTEOUS?

Michael McKinney, June 12, 2016

For too many decades, God's people have been handicapped by the devastating consequences of self-righteousness.

And to varying degrees we are all self-righteous. "Am I self-righteous?" is a rhetorical question. Of course I am.

In our defense it's a very human problem. All mankind suffers from self-righteousness. It is our default mindset. It's where we want to be. Unless we are vigilant, we naturally drift into it. There is a bias in human nature that tilts towards self-righteousness

And it brings with it laws and even more laws; laws on top of laws. A group of self-righteous people are not of one mind and of one spirit even if they agree on the set of laws they would purportedly die for. Self-righteousness actually brings about envy, strife and division. It brings impatience, harshness and a punitive approach to other people. It brings arrogance, anger, selfishness, opinions and blasphemy. It separates us from God.

But here's the real kicker: As God's people, we profess and, for the most part, keep God's laws. And we can get pretty good at it. We can feel pretty good about ourselves to the point where we think we are eating from the Tree of Life, while all the time we are eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

"No way," you say. How can it be that I'm keeping God's very own laws and not be eating from the Tree of Life? How can I possibly not be reconciled to God while I'm keeping His laws and observing His Holy Days? It seems incongruous that we could be keeping God's laws and not be fully immersed in the Tree of Life—not be His people—not be His firstfruits.

Self-righteousness is especially destructive to God's people because it is so deceptive. It is a tool of Satan to keep us separated from God even as we think we are moving closer to Him. A self-righteous person rejects the Holy Spirit even as they pretend to call on it. It is the deadliest frame of mind we can allow ourselves to drift into

because it is almost impossible to see in ourselves and we reject any thought that we might be the one immersed in it.

The apostle Paul explained how we can go through life feeling pretty good about ourselves—carefully observing God’s laws—and never grow into the relationship God wants us to have with Him. When Christ returns we will not rise to meet Him because we will have never learned to think like Him. And to think like God thinks is the end goal for each and every one of us.

The apostle Paul is one of the most misunderstood writers found anywhere in the Bible. He has been accused of starting his own version of Christianity—going off in his own direction. He has been accused of doing away with the law—saying we don’t need it. But in fact, Paul thought just the opposite.

Paul is uniquely qualified to talk about self-righteousness because Paul knows the law—inside and out. Paul said, “I was circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee … as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” He said, not only that, “I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.” In other words, “I kept the law better than you.”

Yet as a former Pharisee and legalist, he is not a legalist. His focus is not the law.

On the road to Damascus, Christ gave Paul a view of the big picture; a deeper understanding of what God is doing with humanity. From that time on, Paul saw the law very differently.

Paul’s letters address very human, very universal issues. His letters represent conversations he was having with God’s people; trying to get it right. In 1 Corinthians 7:1 he refers to one such letter. Unfortunately, we have only one side of the conversations he was having and not even all of his letters. But we deeply need what we do have for they speak to us today of issues that beguile us. These are not just problems people were having 2000 years ago; these are our issues.

The letter to the congregations in Galatia is an appropriate letter for us today as it addresses the issue of trying to be good on our own strength and the self-righteousness that sets in when we do.

When we think of a congregation that totally missed the mark in the first century, our mind most likely goes to the Corinthian Church. Survey says, “Corinth.” There was open immorality, a party-like approach to the Passover, incest, tolerance of sin, ranking of human leaders and class distinctions; and on it goes. What were they thinking?

The Churches in Galatia, on the other hand, were very committed to the word of God. They were strict observers of the law and were willing to do anything to be obedient and often at great personal cost. You and I might say, “They got it.”

Yet Paul's letter to the Corinthians is relatively gentle, while the letter to the Galatians is quite harsh. Paul didn't commend the Galatians as we might expect. He called them foolish, deceived, and deserters of Christ; chasing after another gospel. He said they suffered in vain. He said he would like to change his tone with them, but he had his doubts about them. He wasn't sure they would get it. These are not the kinds of words you, as a law-abiding congregation, would expect to hear.

The different approaches to the two congregations is not that Paul thought less of the sins of the Corinthians, but he thought that they would be more open to instruction; that they would be more willing to acknowledge their sin. A self-righteous people on the other hand, will not listen. They will not acknowledge their sin. They will not change. For God's people, self-righteousness is a problem that requires zealous action because it makes us resistant to correction and it divides us. And without correction we will never find ourselves reconciled to God no matter how well we think we are keeping the law. We will never know God.

Paul refers to God's people as *hagios* [hag-ee-os], which has been translated as *saints*. It means holy ones, God's dedicated people; people set apart for God's possession, use and service. Paul uses it at least once in all of his letters except one—the letter to the law-abiding congregations of Galatia. Clearly Paul needed to do something to wake these people up. He needed to shift their thinking or they would not become a people set apart for God's possession, use and service. They would not be the firstfruits that they longed to be.

We need to ask ourselves, is Paul writing to me? Please turn to Galatians 1. After a brief hello, Paul begins the letter to the Galatians by basically saying, "What do you think you're doing?"

Galatians 1:6 (NIV) **I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—**

7 which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.

8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse!

9 As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!

Paul is rather abrupt here. He is not mincing words. He is not suggesting a few tweaks to these law-abiding congregations in Galatia. If they had failed to note the lack of the usual courtesies in the opening usually found in his other letters, they could hardly fail to do so now. He's telling them that they have allowed someone to come in

and pervert the message as they first knew it; as Paul and Barnabas first taught it to them on their first trip through the area. They are confused and heading down the wrong path.

In verses 11 through 24 Paul explains his journey and how he came to understand Christ's message. He reminds them how legalistic he was; how he knew Judaism from the inside out and was a prime proponent of it.

11 I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin.

12 I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

13 For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.

14 I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

15 But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased

16 to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being.

17 I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus.

18 Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days.

19 I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother.

20 I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie.

21 Then I went to Syria and Cilicia.

22 I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ.

23 They only heard the report: “The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.”

24 And they praised God because of me.

In Galatians chapter 2, verses 4 and 5, he tells them that he didn't yield even for an hour to those who might pervert the gospel message.

Then in verse 11 he gets to the heart of the problem:

Galatians 2:11 When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.

12 For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.

13 The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

14 When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?

15 “We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles

16 know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.

This is the key point he is trying to bring them back to. This is the gospel message they had left.

17 “But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn’t that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not!

18 If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker.

He explained to them that he was a zealous law-keeper and it did not make him righteous. At the same time, faith in Christ does not mean we break the law. But why would he go back to that, now that he knows that he is justified in Christ?

19 “For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.

20 I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

21 I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”

Paul is saying that his old man has died and he is living a new creation in faith. The same goes for us. If we don't live a new creation in faith, then Christ died for nothing.

Although I'm sure the Galatians would agree that they were justified by faith, they began to act as though growing spiritually was a result of doing good works on their own initiative. They had become legalistic. It is a do-it-yourself righteousness. A trap that is all too easy to fall into.

In Galatians 3:1 Paul asks them:

Galatians 3:1 You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified.

2 I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard?

3 Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?

Why are you believing the Judaizers and the legalists that are bending your ear? He asks them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit as a result of keeping the law or because of your faith. Faith, of course. So after starting down the right path, why are you now trying to do this on your own? Where is your faith?”

Again in chapter 5 and verse 7:

Galatians 5:7 You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth?

8 That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you.

9 “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.”

10 I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty.

He says that this approach is not only an easy trap to fall into, but it is easy to deceive others into following you. He assures them that this is not where God is leading us.

In chapter 4, beginning in verse 21, he brings up the example of Abraham’s desire to have a son so that the promise from God might be fulfilled to demonstrate two ways of living our life—of the spirit or of the flesh.

Galatians 4:21 Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says?

22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman.

23 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.

Because his wife was barren, Abram decided to take things into his own hands and had a son with his servant Hagar. That son was not the fulfillment of the promise. It was the action of the flesh, of Abram’s own reasoning. It was not an act of faith. This is what we do at times. We set out to fulfill God’s will on our own, by our own plans, instead of waiting on God to do what only He can do.

Paul is telling them to not fall for it. “Walk by the Spirit.”

In Galatians 5:4 Paul says:

Galatians 5:4 You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

He says: “You think you are drawing closer to God but in reality you are alienated from Christ. You may look like you are functioning from the Tree of Life, but in reality you are thinking from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.”

5 For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.

6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Self-righteousness is a human-generated approach to God’s word. Like the Pharisees we expand the law consistent with our human minds and reasoning. We create as many rules as we can think of ways to act. It puts the focus back on us and is to our glory. It leads to so many of the problems that Paul addresses in Galatians.

For example, self-righteousness is a form of deception. We think we have it all figured out when we don’t. We deceive ourselves. Our pride in our own righteousness becomes our undoing.

Galatians 6:3 If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves.

Then in verse 7 he warns them that they won’t get away with it. There is a price to pay. Your end will not be what you think it is going to be.

7 Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.

8 Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.

Self-righteousness thwarts any chance we have of developing the mind of God. We resist correction; we are defensive of any feedback.

Because the focus is on us, we take everything personally and are offended that anyone would suggest that we are doing something wrong. We can dismiss the messenger of being carnally-minded, a compromiser or just plain mean.

You can be so busy trying to be right that you are wrong. You will remember the story of Martha in Luke 10:38-42.

Luke 10:38 As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him.

39 She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said.

40 But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”

41 “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things,

42 but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

Martha is busy looking after people and trying to hold the whole event together. She is working hard and feels, because of her activity, she is in the right. We would no doubt admire her for it. But Jesus wasn't impressed. Yet it is hard for us to imagine that if we aren't busy doing, nothing will ever get done. Jesus thought that there were things that were more important than making sure everything got done the way we think it should get done. We can begin to think that what we are doing is more important than what God is trying to show us or do through us.

We can get so caught up in the need to do rather than spend our time listening to God. Where is our focus? It is self-delusional to think we are more important than we are and that kind of delusion leads away from God. Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church and that realization should change our focus.

Self-righteousness leads to a desire to make a “good showing in the flesh” as Paul puts it.

Galatians 6:12 (NKJV) As many as desire to make a good showing in the flesh, these would compel you to be circumcised, only that they may not suffer persecution for the cross of Christ.

13 For not even those who are circumcised keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.

We do things because of our sense of right and wrong. And in doing so, we deceive ourselves. That's why it is so hard to see this in ourselves. It is rooted in pride.

In Galatians 5:12 Paul is referring to the people who came in and got them whipped up into this do-it-yourself righteousness regarding circumcision. He told them:

Galatians 5:12 (NIV) As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!

In other words, he told them: “Why stop with a simple circumcision; cut it all off.” How much more spiritual would that be? Let's take this human reasoning to its conclusion.

We can never create enough rules to stop us from being sinful. Our sinful nature goes deep and must be dealt with at that level. When we are self-righteous our yardstick is often how we look to others instead of seeing ourselves as God sees us.

Galatians 1:10 **Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.**

When we value what we do from our perspective, we easily begin to compare ourselves to others. No longer looking to God, we value what others say about us. And that leads to competition and judgmentalism.

Galatians 5:13 **You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.**

14 **For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”**

15 **If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.**

And in verse 26 he adds:

26 **Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.**

When we put faith in our own righteousness—in our own strength—tearing someone else down becomes a means of building ourselves up. We go about looking for fault in others to make ourselves feel that much more superior. We try to make a point of our righteousness before others. As Paul warns, if we do we will only end up destroying ourselves.

Self-righteousness and legalism does not lead us to expressing faith through love. It generates quite the opposite thinking. We usually end up with strife, divisions and anger.

We must be clear though, the opposite of legalism isn't anarchy or a casual approach to the law. And again, it certainly is not doing away with it. Nor is that what Paul is suggesting.

At the heart of their problem was their understanding of the law. And in our desire to do the right thing, we can easily fall into the same trap.

Let's go back to Galatians 3 and verse 19:

Galatians 3:19 **(NKJV) What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator.**

20 **Now a mediator does not mediate for one only, but God is one.**

21 Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law.

22 But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

23 But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed.

24 Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.

25 But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

Paul is talking about a transformation in us. He says that the law was codified because of sin. The law condemns us and can't bring us life. We all have sinned.

He adds that it is our tutor to bring us to Christ. The law serves to corral us, so to speak. The law was created as a starting point to begin to reconcile us to God. Our deceived minds can't think our way out of sin; out of a sinful world void of God. God saw our situation and said in effect, "I'm going to help you out." So He gave us the law as part of His plan to reconcile us to Him. It is a stepping-off point to move us in the right direction—back to God.

Maybe it's too simple, but I like to think of it as trying to cross a stream. I exist on one side with my carnal mind. God is on the other side. How do I get to the other side—to know God and develop His mind? To be reconciled with my Creator?

My carnal mind has no way to get there. I can't think my way over. I don't know where to begin. I can't even see the first step.

Paul said in Romans 8:7:

Romans 8:7 The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.

Our carnal minds are hostile to the mind of God. My carnal mind is diametrically opposed to God's mind. I can't reconcile with God on my own. I can't get to the other side on my own. My mind can't even envision the first step it would take to get there.

When we are called God shows us the path. He illuminates the stepping stones we will need to take to get to the other side. His laws are the first step. They point us in the right direction and get us on the right path. They point us to His mind; His thinking. Without them we have nowhere to go. And as the first step, they are absolutely essential; but they are only the first step.

The problem is our physical minds get stuck on the first step. We make it all about the first step. We like lists because they help us to gauge our own rightness. They're

easy to follow. We can be dogmatic. We don't have to think. We feel superior when we compare ourselves to other people. When we compare our lists we are really trying to minimize our own sinfulness.

It's easier to stand on the law and never do the work required to get to the next step. On our own, we can stand there on the first step and say, "Look at me. Look how good I am. I keep the law better than you." And we can put ourselves there without God's help. It is a do-it-yourself spirituality. And we never see the big picture. We never see the destination. All we end up with is a human-generated spirituality. This is completely consistent with the thinking associated with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

After God gave His people His laws they instituted traditions as a protective hedge to keep people from violating God's laws. Eventually those traditions became the law. While good intentioned, they missed the mark. When Jesus came he tried to get us back on track—to tear down the walls that kept us from asking why; to break down the walls that stood between us and knowing the mind of God.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tried to get us to think beyond the letter of the law. He was pointing us towards the mind of God. There is more to the law than you think He told us. We think we are righteous because we keep the letter of the law or because we have set up hedges around them to keep us righteous—to keep us looking good—but we are getting no closer to the mind of God.

In Mark 7:1-13 Jesus tried to explain to them that there is something more going on here that you aren't getting. He is trying to get them to take the next step. To move across the stream ever closer to the mind of God.

Mark 7:1 (NIV) The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus

2 and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.

3 (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders.)

4 When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

5 So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?"

6 He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

7 They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’

Now these are people who upheld the law. They were masters at it and they knew it. They were so good at it that they felt they were in a position to point out the mistakes of others. Yet Jesus wasn't impressed. He said for all their law-keeping they didn't know God. They were no closer to Him than if they hadn't kept the law. They were operating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

8 You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

In their zealousness they had missed the point of the law. In keeping the law they violated the spirit of the law.

9 And he continued, “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!

10 For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’

11 But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)—

12 then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother.

13 Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

Jesus is telling them that you set your own standards to try to be righteous—to keep the law—and you're missing the point and breaking the law by doing so. You are operating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The law is meant to point us to the mind of God and you are hindering that.

You'll remember the Pharisees had a problem with Jesus and His disciples picking heads of grain on the Sabbath day and with Jesus healing a woman on the Sabbath day. So immersed were they in the law that they missed the point of the Sabbath.

Certainly, the law that states you should not murder is a good law and benefits those around us, but the point of it is to lead you to the mind of God. To deeply understand that law does something for me. It is meant to transform my mind.

To honor my mother and my father does something to shape my mind. It benefits my mother and father, but I need to understand what it does for me.

We often think of laws as a burden. Something that keeps us from something we want. And we're always looking for ways around them. That's what a good lawyer does. There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, that says that journalist Gene Fowler went to see

his agnostic friend W. C. Fields near the end of his life and found him reading the Bible. He asked him, "What are you doing?" Fields replied, "I'm looking for loopholes." That's what we do.

It often seems that laws are a bit of a necessary evil. And on a human level we hardly distinguish between the idea of having laws of any kind—man's or God's laws. (Except that intellectually we know God's laws are better than man's laws.)

The difference is that man's laws point to the mind of man. And that only leads us to more laws because of the way we think. Man can't, in fact, keep up with the many ways we can think of getting around the laws we have created. We are a clever group. So we have more laws than we can ever know. And some of them become silly, burdensome and downright absurd. But we must continue to make more laws because our way of thinking demands it. It is never ending.

And we can easily apply our understandable view of law to God's laws, too. Who wants to deal with them more than we have to? I don't know about you, but I don't gravitate to meditating on the law. I don't think of wrapping up an evening reading a book of legal cases or thumbing through *Black's Law Dictionary*.

For me, laws are pretty straightforward. Do not murder. Got it. Do not steal. Got it. Unclean meats. Got it. I don't necessarily rejoice in them other than the fact that they keep you and everyone else in check.

But King David often refers to his delight in the law. He writes about how he likes to meditate on them. What is there to meditate on? David must have seen the laws of God differently. They weren't just laws to him. David was a man after God's own heart because he understood something that self-righteous people don't. David saw what the law leads to.

In Psalm 1 David wrote:

Psalm 1:1 **Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers,**

2 **but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night.**

3 **That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.**

In Psalm 119 we find a few more of his thoughts concerning the law:

Psalm 119:18 **(ESV) Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.**

32 **I will run the way of your commandments, when you shall enlarge my heart.**

33 **Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it unto the end.**

34 Give me understanding [the why], and I will keep your law; yea, I shall observe it with my whole heart.

35 Make me to go in the path of your commandments; for therein do I delight.

97 O how love I your law! It is my meditation all the day.

98 You through your commandments have made me wiser than my enemies: for they are ever with me.

99 I have more understanding than all my teachers: for your testimonies are my meditation.

100 I understand more than the ancients, because I keep your precepts.

101 I have refrained my feet from every evil way, that I might keep your word.

The law was critical to David's understanding, because he saw what they represented and he used them to understand God. David was able to meditate on them and rejoice in them because he saw beyond them. The laws of God opened his mind to the mind of God.

We were never meant to stay on the first step. The first step is never done away with because it is essential to getting us where we need to go. It's the first step. But as we take the next step, our mind is being transformed into a new creation by the power of God's Holy Spirit. We move beyond the law and begin to think like God.

As we begin to understand the mind of God, the laws become fewer in number. We don't need them. It's not that we don't keep them, it's that they are written on our hearts. They become who we are. God Himself doesn't operate by law. He established the laws for us so that through them we can know Him; know what He is, who He is and what He thinks.

When Jesus came along He said that there are only two laws: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. When you see where God is going with all of this, there is much to meditate on. There is much to rejoice over. The law is so much more than a to-do list or something to beat others up with. And they certainly are not about how good we are. They won't save us.

God's way of thinking makes things very simple. Man's mind complicates everything. When we get focused on the law, and our rightness in keeping it, we have to create more laws to demonstrate our righteousness. We have to show others how we keep the law better than they do. It's the "look-at-me" syndrome. Eventually we have to out-do even the law to make ourselves more spiritual.

More importantly, when we read God's word and we are convicted by what we see there (whether it is His law or any instruction we come across, when we see where we are falling short), our first thought should not be how impossible it is to do what he said

or how our circumstances don't permit it. When we are shown something in God's word, we are being given a glimpse into the mind of God. We should be asking God, "How can I begin to incorporate this thinking into my own mind through the power of your Holy Spirit? I want to think like you."

Trying to excuse away one of God's instructions only hurts our growth.

Because we are trying to think like God thinks, it is never about what someone else is doing or not doing. It is never about our circumstances. We love un-lovable wives, we respect un-respectable husbands, we submit to the un-submittable, and we give to the undeserving, because we want to think like God. It's not about them. It is about me learning to think like God. We do it because we want to know God.

Imagine if God said, "I am surrounded by carnal people. They just don't get it. I will not forgive their sins. I will not help them. They don't deserve it. I will not keep my promises because they don't keep theirs." Where would we be? Death would be our only hope. God is not like that. We shouldn't be either.

Every law, every instruction we find in the Bible is a door to see another aspect of God's mind. So if we are looking for loopholes or excusing ourselves from certain instructions because they don't seem to fit our specific circumstances, we are building a wall between us and another aspect of the mind of God.

So while we are saved by faith in God and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, without the law we can't know God. We can't become like Him. We can't become reconciled to Him. And we won't become, as Paul referred to God's people, saints. We won't qualify to be set apart for God's possession, use, and service because we won't know God.

But the law is not something to demonstrate our righteousness or to judge others by. As James said in his letter in chapter 4 and verse 12:

James 4:12 (NIV) There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

We need to be very careful how we think about the law of God. Must it be obeyed? Absolutely. It's how we move towards the mind of God.

I don't think it was an afterthought that Paul mentioned the fruits of the Spirit at the end of his letter to the Galatians. I think it is essential to our very understanding of the law.

Galatians 5:22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

26 Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

The fruits of the Spirit represent the mind of God. And that is where the law is supposed to take us.

If our keeping of the law, if our interpretation of the law, if our administering of the law doesn't include the fruits of the spirit, we have no understanding of the law. If people don't see love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control when we refer to the law of God, when we administer the law of God, when we speak of the law of God, or when we live the law of God, then we have no understanding of the law or of its purpose in our lives. And the result is as Paul described. We become arrogant, provoking one another and comparing ourselves to one another. We devour one another. This does not create a culture where we use what we have learned to serve one another through love as Paul encouraged us to do.

In Luke 11:52 Jesus told the self-righteous, the experts on the law:

Luke 11:52 “Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering.”

We must not be like that. The law is the key to knowledge if you understand it's purpose. Our own self-righteousness cannot only hinder our understanding and growth, but the understanding and the growth of those who would come to know God. Paul told the Galatians to let those kinds of people be accursed.

Paul was very frustrated by the situation that had developed in the congregations in Galatia. It's expressed all throughout his letter. This kind of approach was no doubt part of what he was trying to get across to the Corinthians when he wrote in chapter 3 of his first letter, that he would like to speak to them of deeper things relating to the mind of God, but they hadn't grown enough. We hold ourselves back from the deeper things of God when we get caught up in our rightness before the law and never meditate on what God is doing to transform us into His image.

At the close of his letter to the Galatians Paul wrote in chapter 6, verse 15:

Galatians 6:15 (NKJV) For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation.

16 And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

We don't know the effect of Paul's letter to the congregations in Galatia. We can hope that they understood and acted on it. Will we? Will I?

What matters is the new creation that began by the death of the old self at baptism. As Paul said of himself, this life we now live, we live in faith until – through the power of God's Holy Spirit – Christ is formed in us and we stand ready to serve at His pleasure as His firstfruits. ♦