

## The 5-Minute Counselor

### *The Religious Impulse of the Flesh*

Romans 8:9; Galatians 5:19-26; Philippians 2:12-13

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One of the chief obstacles to recovery is the religious impulse of the flesh. It is insidious precisely because it is religious and thus appears pious and good. And with the growing popularity of so-called spiritual disciplines, Christians are being tempted to comply with this fleshly impulse. Spiritual disciplines are good, if they are done by and in accord with the work of the Spirit. But there is a grave danger of following a religious impulse, which is an act of the flesh, and not the Spirit, so spiritual disciplines become instead, fleshly disciplines.

In Galatians, chapter five, Paul's list of the acts of the flesh include "idolatry and **witchcraft**" (Galatians 5:20). It is this act of the flesh to which he refers to in Galatians 3:1-3: "You foolish Galatians! Who has **bewitched** you?" In other words, the alternative "gospel" being touted by the false teachers was of the flesh, particularly, idolatry and witchcraft, and so Paul asks, "Who has bewitched you?" The religious impulse belongs to the realm of the flesh. Two critical points:

First, the one in Christ belongs to the realm of the Spirit, and not to the realm of the flesh (Romans 8:9). And these realms are absolutes, you belong to one or the other and they oppose each other (Galatians 5:16-18).

Second, the gospel of Christ calls us to work out what God has accomplished in his Son on our behalf, and which was deposited in you on the basis of faith alone, when you were sealed for redemption by the Spirit (Ephesians 1:14). We are to work out what we already are in Christ, what we already possess: "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12-13); that *purpose* being conformity to Christ (Romans 8:26-30). But the Galatians were being bewitched to another purpose, to conform to disciplines based in Jewish tradition. The Judaizers were teaching spiritual disciplines.

So let me say it this way:

**There is a world of difference between working out something you already possess based upon the finished work of Christ alone (Philippians 2:12-13); *versus* working to become something you presently are not in order to ensure your continued acceptance before God and membership within the people of God.**

It was the latter emphasis to which the Galatians were being tempted. And the consequences were deadly. They were genuine Christians, but they were being bewitched to rest in the flesh, and not the Spirit (Galatians 3:1-6). The “Judaizers” were bewitching them to rely upon the religious impulse of the flesh, and not in the finished work of Christ, by the Spirit.

So, how do you know if you are walking in the Spirit, or being bewitched? It is discovered in your motives for the so-called “spiritual disciplines.” If you are working to become something you presently are not to either gain acceptance with God or ensure continued acceptance with God and membership within the people of God, *you are bewitched*, you are giving in to the religious impulse of the flesh, and, the other acts of the flesh are certain to follow! What’s more, you are alienated from Christ—“Christ is of no value to you” (Galatians 5:2); and you must now relate to God on the basis of works (law) and the whole law—none of this silly splitting up the law as civil, ceremonial, and moral. You must obey it all. In other words, certain teachers, and your compliance to them, are reimposing the curse of the law upon you (Galatians 3:10-14).

It is a lie, and it must be stopped, and a return made to the truth of the gospel. This includes putting away the popular notion of an elevated clergy with special power to bless and even absolve sin, tithing to gain blessing or avoid a curse (Malachi 3:8-12), Saturday or Sunday Sabbath keeping, dress and/or dietary requirements, even mandatory church attendance, as well as observing sacred buildings, holy days, seasons, and so on.

To all these things, Paul responds, “It was for freedom that Christ set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery . . . So I say walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Galatians 5:1, 16). **AMEN.**

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