

Destructive troublemakers (Galatians 5:7–12)

More important than any political liberty is the freedom in Christ which was purchased by the death of Jesus Christ. The Galatian churches had been infiltrated by some who were trying to subject them once again to bondage. The same danger exists for believers today from those who would falsely champion legalism as the way to be right with God. Therefore, knowing some of the destructive characteristics of such troublemakers among the Galatians is helpful.

1. ***They hindered obedience to the truth*** (5:7).

The Christian life is pictured as running a race, a race which involves being fully persuaded by the truth of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Legalism, even in just a small quantity, hinders the “runner.” Be on guard against any teaching which moves away from relying upon God’s grace alone.

2. ***They did not represent God*** (5:8).

God, who had called them by the grace of Christ (1:6; cf. 1:15), was not the source of this erroneous “persuasion”, that believers must subject themselves to the law. Check every teaching –and even your own “persuasions”– by the written Word of God.

3. ***They introduced a contagion*** (5:9).

“Leaven” or “yeast” could picture either that which spread or evil or both (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:6–8). The false teaching of legalism was an evil that could spread, like a contagious disease, either throughout the thinking of an individual or throughout a church. It can begin small. Therefore, always seek to have in mind where a doctrine or practice could lead, and don’t lightly dismiss “small” issues.

4. ***They faced judgment*** (5:10).

Those who falsely taught legalism would face the punishment which future judgment would impose. In contrast to them, true believers like the Galatians are preserved by their Lord and would from their changed heart respond correctly to the truth. When faced with the ultimate question of the reason for being accepted into the presence of God, the true believer confesses that it is only by God’s grace in Christ.

5. ***They misrepresented the truth*** (5:11).

The Judaizers among the Galatians apparently misrepresented Paul as teaching circumcision when it was convenient for him, perhaps because of his concession among Jews (cf. Acts 16:3; 21:21–24). But his persecution by Jews demonstrated the falseness of that misrepresentation. Paul preached the cross, Christ crucified, which was an offense to Jews because it contradicted their understanding of the Messiah and represented the total inadequacy of the entire Jewish system: sacrifices, circumcision, priesthood, tradition, etc. Watch out for false premises which lead to wrong doctrines and wrong practice.

6. ***They were inconsistent trouble-makers*** (5:12).

Paul’s harsh wish for the Judaizers aligns with his opening condemnation of such false teachers (1:8–9). This was an issue of the eternal destiny of people. If Judaizers thought a small physical mutilation helped spiritually (cf. Philippians 3:2), let them go all the way and make themselves eunuchs as practiced in some of the surrounding pagan religions. Their teaching was troubling or “unsettling” the Galatian believers. The entry of false teaching from outside the church and even arising from within the church is a constant danger (cf. Acts 20:29–30).

False teachers were confusing the Galatian believers about their freedom in Christ and were striving to put them once again under bondage. They would pay the penalty for that, but the Galatian believers needed to get back on track, purge out the falsehood, and go on in the grace of God in Christ.

Questions for further thought and discussion:

- To what extent are you aware of a divine penalty for teaching (formally or in “causal” counsel) what is not biblically true? Why should you give this consideration?
- Why must you be careful to actually represent what others say, even when you may not agree?
- Is there varying importance to biblical teaching? Why/why not? If so, how can you determine the relative importance of biblical doctrines?