

The Judaizers of the New Testament:

Sunday School Lesson Notes

Who Were the Judaizers?

The Primary Errors of the Judaizers

1. Misuse of God's _____
2. Mixture of _____ and _____
3. Misidentifying the _____ Community
4. Self-Righteous _____
5. Fear of _____

The Diseased Fruit of the Judaizers

Judaizers in the Early New Testament Period

Judaizers in the Late New Testament Period

The Judaizers of the New Testament

Dogs, Evildoers, and Mutilators of the Flesh (Phil. 3:2)

Who Were the Judaizers?

- ‘Judaizer’ is a pejorative term that refers to Jewish Christians who mandated that circumcision, and therefore adherence to all ceremonial statutes of the Law of Moses, is required for salvation.
 - “But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’” (Acts 15:1).
 - “But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the Gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles **to live like Jews** [ἰουδαΐζειν (*ioudaizein*): literally, ‘to Judaize’]” (Gal. 2:14)?
- The Apostles, after Christ’s Ascension and the Outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, continued to uphold many Jewish rites and customs (Acts 2:46, 3:1, 16:1-3, 18:18, 20:5-6, 20:16, 21:23-26). However, by the time of the Jerusalem Council, the Apostles agreed that it was wrong to necessarily impose such customs on the Gentiles (Acts 15:22-29).

The Primary Errors of the Judaizers

- **Misuse of the Law of God**
 - “Now we know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully” (1 Tim. 1:8).
 - Paul tells us that the Law was a “guardian until Christ came” (Gal. 3:24), such that “Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Rom. 10:4). Therefore, the Law was never intended to grant to us righteousness before God, but to direct us to the righteousness that God gives us in Christ.
 - Paul is likely referring to the Judaizers when he warns the Colossians: “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col. 2:16-17).
- **Mixture of Works and Grace, Law and Gospel**
 - The Judaizers put “confidence in the flesh” (Phil. 3:3, cf. Gal. 6:13), wishing to “be justified by the Law” (Gal. 5:4).
 - Paul is clear that any attempt to justify oneself before God by works is antithetical to the grace of the Gospel—anyone who does so nullifies God’s grace and severs themselves from Christ (Gal. 2:15-21, 5:2-4, cf. Rom. 11:6).
 - A Christian’s confidence is not in their own flesh, but in the alien righteousness of Christ by God’s grace through faith (Phil. 3:8-11).
- **Misidentifying the Ecclesial Community**
 - The Judaizers essentially taught that if anyone wants to be a Christian, they must *first* become a Jew. Therefore, they taught that the Universal Church only consists of observing Jews and not of Gentiles.
 - This runs contrary to the Gospel itself, since Paul recognizes that Christ “has made us [Jews and Gentiles] both one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the Law of Commandments expressed in ordinances, that

He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the Cross, thereby killing the hostility” (Eph. 2:14-16).

- This peaceful union is made possible insofar as “you [the Gentiles], although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree” (Rom. 11:17)

- **Self-Righteous Hypocrisy**

- The Judaizers insisted that salvation was dependent upon their works done according to the Law; however, even they were unable to fulfill these same demands of the Law. They mandated others to do what they themselves couldn’t do.
 - “For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision” (Rom. 2:25).
 - “For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the Law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh” (Gal. 6:13).
 - “Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear” (Acts 15:10)?

- **Fear of Persecution**

- The motivation of the Judaizers is given to us by Paul: “only in order that they may not be persecuted for the Cross of Christ” (Gal. 6:12).
 - Jewish believers who abandoned circumcision—and other strictly Jewish customs—were likely to experience social, religious, and familial ostracism. Therefore, many self-professing Christians would embrace the Mosaic Law in order to appease both their Jewish and Christian connections.
- The Birkat haMinim was a first-century benediction in the Jewish Amidah prayer that targeted and cursed heretics. Although the Birkat haMinim has changed over the centuries, the Talmud shows that the original benediction targeted ‘sectarians,’ who were understood to at least include Messianic Christians (*Berakhot* 28b-29a).
 - Epiphanius of Salamis (310–403 AD) writes about the Jews centuries later: “In this Sect [the Nazoraeans] too, my brief discussion will be sufficient. People of their kind are refutable at once and easy to detect and, rather [than being heretical Christians], are Jews and nothing else. Yet to the Jews they are very much enemies. Not only do Jewish people bear hatred against them; they even stand up at dawn, at midday, and toward evening, three times a day when they recite their prayers in the synagogues, and curse and anathematize them—saying three times a day, ‘God curse the Nazoraeans’” (*Panarion* 24:9.1-2).
 - Jerome of Stridon (347–420 AD) tells us that the Nazoraeans were akin to the Judaizers of Paul’s day, saying that “they believe in Christ, the Son of God born of Mary, the Virgin, and they say about Him that He suffered and rose again under Pontius Pilate, in Whom we also believe, but since they want to be both Jews and Christians, they are neither Jews nor Christians” (*Letter 75 to Augustine*, sec. 13)

The Diseased Fruit of the Judaizers

- “Look out for the ***dogs***, look out for the ***evildoers***, look out for ***those who mutilate the flesh***” (Phil. 3:2).
- “For there are many who are ***insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers***, especially those of the Circumcision Party [...], devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth [...] They profess to know God, but ***they deny Him by their works***. They are ***detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work***” (Titus 1:10, 13, 16).
- Those ‘super-apostles’ who preach a different Gospel than Paul and the Apostles (Gal. 2:9) are ***“false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as Apostles of Christ***. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds” (2 Cor. 11:13-15).
 - The ironic end of the Judaizers is spoken of by Paul: “I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves” (Gal. 5:12)! Therefore, all who preach the Gospel of the Judaizers shall “be accursed” (Gal. 1:8), bearing the covenant curse that circumcision pointed to—being “severed from Christ” (Gal. 5:4, cf. Gen. 17:9-14).

Judaizers in the Early New Testament Period

- Judaizing was the primary heresy of the Primitive Church, since the vast majority of Christians at the time were Jewish. By the time the Church consisted mostly of Gentiles, the Judaizers either apostatized or vanished.
- Early Events Leading to the Downfall of the Judaizers:
 - **The Jerusalem Council**
 - “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well” (Acts 15:28-29)
 - **The Antiochian Incident**
 - “But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the Circumcision Party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy” (Gal. 2:11-13).

Judaizers in the Late New Testament Period

- Late Events Leading to the Downfall of the Judaizers:
 - **The Siege of Jerusalem and the Destruction of the Temple (70 AD)**
 - The destruction of the Temple rendered it impossible to practice the Mosaic Law in full. Therefore, all ceremonial practices that were connected to the Temple could no longer be held as a requirement by the Judaizers, whether religiously or institutionally.
 - The Romans slaughtered and enslaved massive numbers of Jews at the Siege of Jerusalem. The Roman-Jewish historian Josephus (37–100 AD) claimed that 1.1

million people died in the siege (by famine or violence) and 97,000 were taken captive (*The Wars of the Jews* VI.9.3). Meanwhile, the majority of Christians in Jerusalem fled to Pella, a town in the North of Perea across the Jordan, during the siege because of Jesus' warning in Matthew 24:15-20 and Luke 21:20-24 (Eusebius' *Church History* III.5.3). It is highly likely that large numbers of the Judaizers were killed or enslaved by remaining in Jerusalem, thus diminishing their influence.

- Josephus describes how “[the Romans] ran every one through whom they met with, and obstructed the very lanes with their dead bodies, and made the whole city run down with blood, to such a degree indeed that the fire of many of the houses was quenched with these men’s blood” (*The Wars of the Jews* VI.8.5).
- By the time of the latest NT writings, the Apostle John is dealing with the heresies of antinomianism (the belief that Christians are freed from every obligation to keep God’s Law) and Docetism (the denial that Christ assumed true and ordinary human flesh but only ‘appeared’ to do so), not the Judaizers. This strongly suggests that the Judaizing heresy was mostly absent by the latter years of John.
 - A possible exception to this may be in the Book of Revelation, when ethnic Jews who persecute the churches are named “a synagogue of Satan” (Rev. 2:9, 3:9). This may, in part, refer to Judaizers, but the text does not immediately refer to them as such.

Judaizers After the New Testament Period

- Immediately after the deaths of the Apostles, some Early Church Fathers (like Ignatius of Antioch) warned against the absurdity of Judaizing, while others (like Pseudo-Barnabas) began to teach a very harsh, anti-Jewish polemic.
 - Ignatius of Antioch (30–110 AD), a disciple of the Apostle John, writes: “Let us not, therefore, be insensible to His kindness. For were He to reward us according to our works, we should cease to be. Therefore, having become His disciples, let us learn to live according to the principles of Christianity. For whosoever is called by any other name besides this, is not of God. Lay aside, therefore, the evil, the old, the sour leaven, and be changed into the new leaven, which is Jesus Christ. Be salted in Him, lest any one among you should be corrupted, since by your savour you shall be convicted. **It is absurd to profess Christ Jesus, and to Judaize.** For Christianity did not embrace Judaism, but Judaism Christianity, that so every tongue which believes might be gathered together to God” (*Epistle to the Magnesians* 10)
- Justin Martyr (100–165 AD) distinguishes between Christians who decide to uphold the ceremonial statutes of Moses “through weak-mindedness” but do not require others to uphold them and those who demand that all Christians must necessarily uphold the statutes of Moses for salvation. Of the former, he says that “we ought to join ourselves to such, and associate with them in all things as kinsmen and brethren.” Of the latter, he says that “I in like manner do not approve of them,” although he admits that those who have been earnestly deceived by the Judaizers will probably be saved (*Dialogue with Trypho* 47).
- Interestingly, Eusebius of Caesaria (fourth century AD) observes that the first 15 bishops of the church in Jerusalem (starting with James, then to Symeon, Justus, Zachaeus, Tobias, Benjamin,

John, Matthias, Philip, Seneca, Justus, Levi, Ephres, Joseph, and Judas) were “bishops of the circumcision” (*History of the Church* IV.5.1-4), indicating that they all upheld certain Jewish customs like the early Apostles, even as none of them sympathized with the Judaizers.

- This is consistent with what the New Testament tells us about James. Although he decisively ruled against the Judaizers (Acts 15:13-21), James had strong associations with the Judaizers in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:12) and seemingly encouraged Jewish believers to observe certain Mosaic statutes (Acts 21:20-24).
- By the first few centuries after the Apostles, the Judaizers ceased to be identified in Christian circles and instead only existed within apostate sects of Christianity, like the Ebionites.
 - The Ebionites not only demanded strict obedience to the Mosaic Law, but they also rejected the Divinity and Virgin Birth of Christ, the Apostolicity of Paul, and the Triune nature of God.
 - Although Ebionism was never formally anathematized by a church council, prominent orthodox Christians (Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian of Carthage, Hippolytus of Rome, etc.) quickly refuted the Ebionites as heretics and the successors of the Judaizers. As a result, Ebionism did not gain much traction within mainstream Christianity and waned significantly with time.