The Danger of a Different Gospel  
A Study of the Epistle of Galatians  
Galatians 1:1-10  
Pastor Bryan Clark

What do you think was the single greatest concern of the New Testament writers for you as a Christian today? What do you think was Paul’s greatest concern for the integrity of the gospel message less than twenty years after the ascension of Christ? What do you think was the cause of a conflict between the apostle Paul and the apostle Peter? In 2nd Corinthians Paul refers to “a thorn in the flesh”. What do you think was the main issue at the heart of this “thorn in the flesh”? And when God actually became flesh and walked on this earth, what do you believe was the primary source of conflict that would be so intense that people would call for His execution?

I believe the answer to every single one of those questions is the same: Legalism. I believe that you can make a strong case that the single greatest concern of the New Testament writers for you today as a Christian was legalism and what that would do to your relationship with God.

The book of Galatians is all about preserving the integrity of the message of the gospel. It was written less than twenty years after the ascension of Christ. Now think about this. Well within the lifetime of those who received the message of the gospel directly from the mouth of Jesus—in less than twenty years—there’s concern that the message is corrupted. What do you think is the possibility 2000 years later that there’s some confusion?

Legalism created a conflict between the apostle Paul and the apostle Peter and we’re going to talk about that in a couple of weeks. I think if you look at the passage where Paul talks about his “thorn in the flesh,” even though lots of people speculate about what that was, I think if you look at the comment within the context in which it was given, it’s the Judaizers; it’s the religious Jews who dogged Paul every step of his public ministry and made his life miserable. And without question, when God became flesh and walked on this earth, the problem was not the world; the problem was the religious legalists that ultimately called for His execution. All that to say, it seems to me legalism is a very big problem.

This morning we are going to start a study of the book of Galatians—it will take us basically up till Christmas—which is all about legalism and its effect on the message of the gospel and its effect on us as believers. Galatians was written right about A.D. 50, so just a little bit less than twenty years after the ascension of Christ. It is really a staggering thought that still within the lifetime of those that received the message directly out of the mouth of Jesus, still within their lifetime, the message of the gospel is being corrupted by a message of legalism!

I think the history of the church can be defined by pendulum swings. We (this church) come out of the fundamentalist movement, which was actually a reaction to liberalism—theological liberalism—and that clearly was a concern. So in reaction to that, the fundamentalist movement was born, but in a sense the pendulum swung too far. It was an over-reaction and pretty soon the people found themselves, unfortunately, neck deep in legalism. There was another generation, then, where the pendulum kind of swung in the midst of post-modernism and relativism, where truth was diminished and, “It’s not all that important,” and the pendulum swung way too far the other
direction. Now you actually have a couple of generations who have never known anything but post-modernism, anything but relativism, and it feels to me like the pendulum is swinging again. Now I’m not a prophet—I work for a non-profit organization—(laughter)—it’s always just too easy, isn’t it? — (laughter) But I will tell you this: I see all the signs that this generation is swinging to legalism and we can’t let that happen. It’s got to be, not pendulum swings. It’s got to be about the truth because it’s the truth that sets us free. We went through Galatians eleven years ago, so there are a lot of you that weren’t around then, and it’s a very fundamental letter to understand. Those of us who were around, we certainly need the reminder; we’re all vulnerable to this, but also because we spent all of last year going through the book of Romans, which is the gospel of grace. Galatians, then, is about the corruption of that message, so the best way to understand Galatians is to put it right up against Romans. So since we did Romans last year, then it makes sense to do Galatians this year.

So if you have a Bible turn with us to Galatians, Chapter 1. Now of course these are letters and in the first century there were templates that were used for letters and, for the most part, Paul follows these templates. But Galatians is a little bit different than that, and I’ll try to point that out. He opens:

Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: (*NASB, Galatians 1:1-2)

This is a fairly normal opening. Paul’s the writer; it’s to the churches in Galatia. Most of those were started on his first missionary journey. But what is interesting is the third word of the introduction. Paul identifies himself immediately as an apostle, and then he makes this statement that he is a true apostle, not through some agency of man or not sent from some man, but actually from God Himself. After Paul left the churches of Galatia, the Judaizers, which would be the Jewish legalists, made their way into the region of Galatia and were proclaiming a message of legalism: primarily you still have to be circumcised in order to experience salvation. One of the ways of dismantling Paul’s theology of grace was to discredit Paul himself, and they were doing that by saying he’s not really an apostle. “I mean, after all, he’s not one of the twelve. He wasn’t in the inner circle, so he’s not really an apostle,” and these Judaizers had had a dramatic effect on Peter. He’s a real apostle; he agrees with us, and so they’re trying to make the case that Paul doesn’t really have authority. So Paul identifies himself as an apostle and, strategically, when he says, not sent from men or through the agency of men, what he is saying is the Judaizers were sent through an agency of man. They were sent from a man organization but he, himself, is claiming authority from God.

Now to be an apostle, in the strictest sense, basically meant you were chosen by Jesus Himself, that you had been taught by Jesus and that you had witnessed the resurrected Christ. Paul, of course, could identify all of those miraculously on the Damascus road and following. It was Jesus Himself; he saw the resurrected Christ; he was called by the resurrected Christ; he was taught by the resurrected Christ. Therefore the claim he’s making is, “I am an apostle, not sent by any human agency, but from God Himself.”

Now just to stop here for a minute is helpful as we kind of create a lens through which we are going to view the entire book of Galatians. Sometimes you hear people say, and even church people say, “Well, that’s just Paul’s opinion,” as if the Bible is merely a collection of people’s opinions. It is very helpful to understand the Bible does not claim to be a collection of people’s opinions. It actually claims to be the very word of God. We refer to this as internal evidence. To understand
Paul is not just stating some of his thoughts, he is saying here, “I got this message directly from the mouth of God Himself, and I am therefore telling you this is what God says.” Peter says in 2nd Peter that men were actually moved by the Spirit of God to write exactly what God wanted written—every word, every period, every comma in a sense—everything is exactly the way God wanted it. Now there are lots of ways that we could talk about defending the credibility of that, the credibility of the inspiration and the authority of Scripture. That’s not really our purpose this morning. I’m simply saying Paul is making this claim; we’re going to take this claim that it is the authoritative word of God. This is what God says defines the gospel of salvation. So that’s the lens through which we are going to view the book of Galatians. Verse 3:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever more. Amen. (Vs. 3-4)

Now we’ve talked about this before, that couplet—*grace* and *peace*—should not be just passed over as an irrelevant opening greeting. You cannot experience peace as a Christian unless you have a very healthy understanding of the doctrine of grace. You simply can’t! Legalism does not offer peace. Legalism offers fear; it offers insecurity; it offers unrest; it offers bondage, but it cannot offer peace. It cannot offer joy; it cannot offer delight in a relationship with God. You have to have a healthy theology of grace to experience peace and rest in the presence of God. So he opens: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins.

Now this is very unusual that Paul would include such heavy theology in the introduction of a letter. Usually the introductions are, “Hey, how’s it going? Nice to see you; been praying for you,” and then he moves into the theology. But he’s barely into the introduction and he actually is outlining the very core of the substance of the theology of Christianity: Christ died for our sins. The reason is because it’s that message itself that is at risk. This is what’s being corrupted by legalism. This is the very center of the debate. Was the death of Jesus on the cross enough or is there something more required? It’s like Paul is so concerned—there’s such a sense of urgency—that he can’t really engage in some sort of small talk. He’s just getting right to it. And the core theology is Christ died for our sins. We refer to this as the substitutionary atonement of Christ, meaning Jesus died for me. The death of Jesus was not just the death of a martyr. It was not just some heroic demonstration of love. He actually died for me. He died in my place. He died my death. And when Jesus hung on that cross, He Himself said, “Tetelestai”. It’s a banking term. It means paid in full. Most of your English translations say, “It is finished.” Those are critical words to understand. Jesus Himself said on the cross, “It is finished”. The debt has been paid. He died for me—nothing else required! Nothing else needed! I cannot somehow add to that. I can’t somehow improve that. I don’t need to somehow ratify that. Jesus died for me. That’s the very essence of the gospel of grace.

...who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age. The word *rescue* kind of carries this idea of deliverance. It’s used in the book of Acts, of Peter being delivered from prison. Every single one of us was in bondage. We were in prison for our own sin and the consequences of that sin, but when Jesus died for our sins, He made a way out. He offered us a ransom that we might be set free. It’s everything that we studied last year in the book of Romans: that I could stand in the presence of God and be declared legally righteous forever because I stand in the righteousness of Christ. Therefore, “There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.” It’s magnificent theology.
It’s helpful to remind ourselves that we didn’t escape from prison. Escape from prison implies this idea that under the cloak of darkness, somehow I escaped and I am living my life as a fugitive and I’m hiding because, if they find me, they will put me back in jail. I did not escape. I was given a pardon! I walk in the light. I have been set free! Nobody can put me back in jail again. He has rescued us! And it closes with the reminder that this was the plan. This was the will of God. He identified in Genesis 3 that He would make a way back to paradise and this was the fulfillment of the plan for His glory.

A very interesting introduction—very unusual that he would have that heavy of theology in the introduction and also interesting to note there is no, “Hey, I’m praying for you; I’m thinking about you,” which is in all the other introductions. Again you get a sense of his concern, a sense of the urgency, but if you haven’t got that yet, trust me, in the next couple of verses you will be sobered by the intensity of the language that he uses.

Eleven years ago, when we did this study, one weekend somebody stopped me in the hallway—somebody that no longer attends—and made this statement, “Pastor, I love my legalism. It’s what keeps me in line.” Keep that statement in your mind and think about these verses to follow. Verse 6:

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; (Vs. 6-7a)

That word amazed is a word that means, “I’m astonished; I’m shocked; I cannot believe it.” Paul, on the first missionary journey, shared with them this magnificent message of grace which set them free and now, a very short amount of time has passed, and already they are beginning to compromise the message of grace back into a lifestyle of legalism and Paul says, “I’m shocked! I’m astonished so quickly you would desert Him.” Desert is a military term. It means to change sides. It means to be a betrayer. It means to be a traitor. Now here’s the sobering part of the text. Look closely at that statement. It’s not you’re deserting what. It’s you’re deserting whom! When you desert the message of grace, you are actually betraying Christ Himself! That’s what the text says. You are deserting Him by deserting grace. You’ve actually become a traitor to Christ when you no longer believe the message of grace.

...by the grace of Christ for a different gospel; which is really not another—in other words, once you add one single thing to the finished work of Jesus on the cross, it ceases to be a gospel of grace and now has become a different gospel which is actually no gospel at all. That’s what he just said there. When you add one single work, one single religious ritual, one single performance, one thing that you have to do in order to experience God’s salvation, it ceases to be a gospel of grace. It becomes a different gospel.

Now let me talk about this for a minute because I think sometimes this gets confusing. There’s a tendency to think it’s all they need to know. Whatever they believe beyond that isn’t really all that important, so as long as people articulate the message of Christmas and the message of Easter, the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, whatever they believe beyond that is somewhat irrelevant. As a matter of fact we’d often process that as thinking, you know, maybe those other things that are required are just like extra credit. They’re just like bonus points. They’re just like: why not cover all the bases, just in case? But do you understand what he just said? He said that if you add one thing—one religious ritual, one requirement, one holy day, one single thing that is necessary for you to do beyond the finished work of Jesus on the cross—at that point, it ceases to be a gospel of grace.
Grace simply is not compatible with one single work and, at that point, it has actually become a different gospel which is actually no gospel at all. Those are very sobering words. Verse 7:

...which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

The word disturbing there is a word that means to agitate, to shake, to stir up trouble. One of the things that I have noticed over the years: wherever there is legalism, there is conflict...wherever there is legalism, there is conflict! Whether you are talking about in a marriage, whether you are talking about in a home, whether you are talking about in the marketplace, whether you are talking about in church—wherever there is legalism, there is conflict. It’s the very nature of legalism. It’s to fight; it’s to judge; it’s to measure; it’s to score. That’s what legalism is! It’s always asking for a fight and that’s exactly what Paul is saying, that these Judaizers have agitated them, shaken them up, created conflict, because that’s what legalism does. You just don’t ever have peace in a legalistic environment. The word distort literally means to reverse. These people actually want to reverse the gospel, to turn it completely upside down and make it a gospel of works. Verse 8:

But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed. (Vs. 8-9)

I’m not sure I can explain to you adequately how severe that language is. As a matter of fact it’s so severe that some commentators are so disturbed by it that they seek to explain it away by saying Paul just had an outburst of anger. He didn’t really mean it. But if you believe in an inspired, authoritative text, you can’t take that interpretation. Of course he meant it! As a matter of fact he said it twice. This isn’t an outburst. It’s a very carefully thought-through statement. It’s also sobering that he includes himself: if we or even an angel from heaven, not the demons, an angel from heaven proclaims to you a message contrary to the message you received which is the book of Romans—the true gospel of grace—that person is to be accursed! Anathematized! It’s a very strong biblical word that basically means to be devoted to destruction. Literally, what he’s saying is that person should be destroyed. Now he’s not talking about all the people that are deceived by legalism. He’s talking about the preachers, the promoters, the Judaizers—those that lead people astray—those that corrupt the message of the gospel and take thousands of people with them. The concern is so great that he says they should be anathematized; they should be destroyed because of the damage that they are doing.

How do you read those verses and say with integrity as a Christian, “I love my legalism”? I would suggest to you that is utter foolishness. Verse 10 is kind of a transition swing to the next section.

For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ

Apparently the Judaizers were saying that the reason that Paul teaches a gospel of grace is he’s a man-pleaser. He’s just going to tell you some easy believism because he wants everybody to like him. And so Paul is saying, “Hey, does this sound like the message of a man-pleaser?” Right after that he tells them the Judaizers should be cursed. He’s rolling up his sleeves. He’s saying, “I’m going to do battle with the Judaizers.” He’s going to end up in an argument with Peter. He’s going to fight for these people because he loves these people and he’s asking the question, “Does this
sound like a man-pleaser to you?” He says the only reason I’m doing this is because this is my call to be a proclaimer of the message of Christ.

As a preacher myself, I find verse 10 very interesting because my experience would tell me, to think that the message of grace is a man-pleaser, is rather laughable. Over the years, the more I’ve understood grace and the more passionate I’ve become about grace, by far the more I’ve been criticized. If you proclaim a message of grace, you put a target on your chest—not by the people of this body but by my critics out there, and the criticism is always the same. “He talks too much about grace.” I would say, “Guilty as charged.” But I would tell you that if I want to minimize the criticism, I would say I get criticized ten times about grace for every one time for anything else. If I want to minimize the criticism, if I want to quiet my critics, it’s very easy: just preach religion, just preach works, just preach this nice blend of Jesus and some religious stuff. Why?...because that makes perfect sense to people.

Every other environment we will ever experience in this life is performance-based. It’s reward and punishment. Religion just makes sense. That’s why millions of people around the world are drawn to it and, at the core of religion, is this opportunity to still be my own god and still have my own pride in saying, “I somehow, as my own god, can contribute to my own salvation.” That’s what makes religion so appealing is I can still be my own god and I can do the religious thing and I can stroke my ego and say, “God saved me and I helped—me and God—in this together.” Maybe there are some of you here this morning, you’re still on the outside looking in, struggling with this grace thing and, if you are to be honest, it’s because deep down there is still something that convinces you there’s got to be something I can do as my own god to contribute to this, and there’s an appeal to your ego.

Grace is not a man-pleaser. It’s rather offensive. It’s a message of brokenness. It’s a message of humility. It’s a message of desperation—where I die to this idea that I can be my own god, that I can merit salvation in any way—and the only opportunity that I have is to fall before the mercy and grace of a loving Father and receive His gift. That’s all I have. And it runs contrary to this desire: I have to be my own god. It is not a man-pleaser. The message of grace is a message of brokenness. “God, I have no other option. It’s just You!”

God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit—for all eternity have dwelt together—one God, three Persons in relationship—the Father loving the Son, the Son loving the Spirit, the Spirit loving the Father, celebrating, enjoying one another in community forever. Theologians often refer to this as The Dance of God—as God just simply delights in Himself—Father, Son, Holy Spirit. The very essence of salvation is God’s invitation to you to join the dance: that God has made a way by virtue of Jesus’ death on the cross—He died for your sins in order to offer you an invitation, freely given out of His grace, to join the celebration, to join the dance with Him forever. Some of you here this morning have never experienced the dance with God. If you were to be honest, you would say, “You know, I’m up to my eyebrows with religion. I’ve been beat up by religion; I’ve been wounded by religion; I’ve been hurt in more ways than you can imagine. I want this God-thing, but it’s all so confusing and I tell you this, ‘I have never danced with God’.”

My prayer would be over the next couple of months that we would be able to bring clarity—to clear the religion, to clear the legalism—and help you understand that God has invited you to the dance forever. My prayer for you would be, by Christmas time, you would find yourself dancing with God in pure delight. Many of you would identify yourselves as Christians. Some of you have been Christians a very long time but, if you are to be honest with me this morning, you would say, “Bryan, I have to tell you, it’s been a very long time since God and I danced. I don’t know what
happened along the way. When we were young lovers, we danced all the time, but we haven’t really danced together for a very long time.”

The volume of legalism over the years becomes greater and greater until it finally drowns out the music of grace. Legalism stops the dancing and you just find yourself cranking it out day after day after day. My prayer for you would be that we would identify, uncover, and remove the legalism and, by Christmas time, you would find yourself dancing with God in sheer delight once again. May that be so!

Our Father we are thankful that You love us. You gave up Your Son to make a way back that we might dance with You in sheer delight now and forever. God, we acknowledge that the enemy is clever and perhaps his best weapon is legalism that slowly and quietly brings us back into bondage. Lord, my prayer for each one of us is that we would understand the realities of grace, that we might delight, that we might find joy in our dance with You again. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.
Study Questions
The Danger of a Different Gospel
Free Indeed: A Study in the Epistle of Galatians
Galatians 1:1-10

Opening Discussion
1. Brainstorm together and try to come up with a written definition of legalism. We will come back to this definition throughout our study of Galatians, so write it down and save it where you can refer to it along the way.

2. In question #1 you defined legalism. Now define the results of legalism. What effect does it have on our Christian walk? Our peace? Our relationship with God? Our unity?

3. What has been your experience with legalism?


Bible Study
1. Read Galatians 1:1-10 together as a group.

   The Bible was written to be read orally. Until the invention of the printing press, it was not possible to put a Bible in every person’s hand. Therefore, the Bible was written with the intention of public reading.

   The first century audience would not have read the letter, but would have primarily had the letter read to them. They were skilled listeners. Therefore, it is always good to read the text aloud in your group to hear how certain things are emphasized that may be missed in a silent reading.

   In modern books when we want something emphasized we underline, **bold type**, *italicize*, (parenthesize), etc. In an oral culture they used repetition, word pictures, sentence structure, etc. to draw attention to certain themes. To hear and understand the text the way the first readers would have heard and understood the text is very important.

2. The first readers would have been very familiar with the traditional opening to a letter such as this. The writer identifies himself, the recipient is identified, and a word of greeting is offered. In all of Paul’s letters he then opens with a word of thanksgiving for the church and a word of encouragement. That is, in every letter except Galatians. What does this tell us about the tone of this letter?

   How concerned is Paul about what is happening to the Galatians?

3. How does Paul identify himself in 1:1?

   Why is this important?

   Is there anything in Paul’s New Testament letters that can be dismissed as simply Paul’s opinion? Why or why not?
4. Read II Timothy 3:16-17 and II Peter 1:20-21. How do these verses line up with your answer to the preceding question?

Is all of the Bible authoritative?

What does this mean to us in practical terms?

5. In verse 3, “Grace” and “Peace” may seem like the standard opening. But why would these terms be especially significant in a letter addressing legalism?

6. Verse 4 is unusually detailed for the opening remarks of a letter such as this. Why do you suppose Paul is putting this truth on the table right from the beginning?

Does this give us a hint about what Paul is concerned with in this letter? What might that be?

7. In verse 6, Paul states that the Galatians are “deserting” Him who called them. The word translated “deserting” is a military word that means to defect, to change camps. What is the basis by which Paul says they are deserting, and who or what are they deserting?

8. In verse 7, Paul accuses the false teachers of “distorting” the Gospel. The word translated “distort” is used two other times in the New Testament. In both Acts 2:20 and James 4:9 it’s translated “turned.” Read these two passages. Together with Galatians 1:7, what does the word “distorting” mean?

What does it take to “distort” the Gospel of grace?

9. How serious is this distortion according to 1:8-9?

10. According to 1:7, what is the consequence of distorting the Gospel?

Compare the consequence to Paul’s opening statement in 1:3. The true Gospel leads to what, while a distorted Gospel leads to what, according to Paul?

**Application**

1. Define the Gospel of Christ. What would be a distortion of the Gospel of Christ?

2. If you have believed the true Gospel of grace, your life should be characterized by grace and peace. Is it? Why or why not?

3. We live in a culture that values relativism and denies absolutes. When this “present evil age” infects our thinking, we begin to get careless about truth that God defines as absolute. How passionately have you defended the true Gospel of Christ? Remember, the distortion of the Gospel is typically not denying the facts of the Gospel, but rather adding human works to the finished work of Christ on the cross—which eradicates the concept of grace. How much wiggle room is there in your thinking in defining the Gospel of Christ? How much wiggle room did Paul allow with the Galatians?