

Study of Galatians

Wiersbe, W. W. (1992). [*Wiersbe's expository outlines on the New Testament*](#). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Introductory to Galatians

I. Background

Ancient Gaul was peopled by warlike tribes which migrated across Europe into Asia Minor several centuries before the Christian era. They founded a nation called “Galatia” which means “the country of the Gauls.” About a quarter of a century before Christ was born, the Romans made Galatia a part of one of their larger provinces, and called the entire area “Galatia.” In other words, when you spoke about “Galatia” back in Paul’s day, you had to specify whether you meant the smaller nation of Galatia, or the larger Roman province. The problem was somewhat like the one we face when someone says, “I’m going to New York.” Is he going to the state of New York or to New York City?

This problem presents itself as we study the Epistle to the Galatians. Did Paul write this powerful letter to churches in the country of Galatia, or to churches in the Roman province of Galatia? Check a map of the apostolic world in the back of your Bible and you will see what is involved. Most Bible students today believe that Paul wrote to the churches of the province, ones he founded on his first journey (see Acts 13:1–14:28). In other words, he was writing to Christians in Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. If this is true, it means that Galatians was the first of Paul’s epistles, proving that the Gospel of the grace of God was just as clearly presented by Paul at the start of his ministry as at the close.

II. Theme

It will benefit you to review the introductory material to Acts and the notes on Acts 15. You will recall that the message of the kingdom was presented by Peter and the rest of the Twelve in the first chapters of Acts, offering Christ to the Jews. Their answer was to stone Stephen (Acts 7). It was then that the message was taken to the Samaritans (Acts 8) and to the Gentiles (Acts 10–11). Between these two events, Paul was saved (Acts 9). God especially revealed to Paul that He was doing a new thing and that the prophecy message of the kingdom had been replaced (temporarily) by the mystery of the church. However, the masses of believers (some of whom continued to be faithful to the Jewish religion) did not realize that this wonderful new program of grace, for both Jew and Gentile, had come onto the scene.

The issue was debated finally at Jerusalem (Acts 15). The believers concluded (led by the Spirit) that: (1) God’s program for today was to take out of the Gentiles a people for His name; (2) Paul was His apostle to the Gentiles, with a special ministry to the body, the church; (3) the kingdom program would be resumed after the body was completed. However, there were Jews who would not receive the simple message of

grace and who tried to mix it with the Law, blending improperly the kingdom message and the church message. We call these people “Judaizers,” since their aim was to entice Gentile believers into the Jewish system. They taught that a person was saved by faith *and* by keeping the Law, and that the believer was sanctified and enabled to live a holy life in the same manner. These teachers had visited the Gentile churches in Galatia and were upsetting the people (Gal. 1:6–9; 3:1; 4:8–11; 5:7–9; 5:12; 6:12–13). They wanted the believers to follow the Jewish laws and customs of religious holidays, circumcision, etc. This was the “other Gospel” that Paul condemned in Gal. 1:6–9. The only Gospel that God approves and blesses is the Gospel of the grace of God, justification by faith in Christ Jesus alone. We are not saved by making promises to God but by believing His promises.

III. Its Value Today

Galatians is God’s strongest word against legalism. The flesh loves to do things religious—celebrate holy days, practice rituals, attempt to do good works for God. Many religious systems today mix law and grace and present a garbled, confused way of salvation that is actually a way of bondage (Gal. 2:4; 4:9; 5:1). Keeping the Sabbath, dietary laws, an earthly priesthood, holy days, obeying rules—all of these are swept away in Galatians and replaced by the glorious liberty the believer has through faith in Christ!

Galatians 1

The first two chapters are personal, and the key word in them is “Gospel,” found ten times in these forty-five verses. Paul’s aim was to show that his message and ministry came directly from Christ and not from men. Paul did not preach a secondhand message that he learned from Peter or any of the apostles. Rather, God took every measure necessary to keep Paul’s ministry separate from that of the Twelve, lest anyone think Paul’s ministry was given to him by the apostles.

I. Paul’s Announcement of His Gospel (1:1–5)

The Judaizers who “bewitched” the Galatians (3:1) were telling them that Paul’s apostleship and message were not trustworthy because he lacked official endorsement from Jerusalem. “We have our credentials from Peter!” they would say, as though the approval of men is proof that a preacher is sent of God. Paul begins his letter by affirming that his message and ministry came directly from Jesus Christ. (Note Paul’s use of “not neither” in vv. 1, 12, and 17.) He immediately spells out the Gospel that he preached.

Paul’s Gospel was centered in Christ—His death, burial, and resurrection—and not in Moses or the Law. It was a Gospel of grace that brought peace. It was a Gospel of liberty: “that He might deliver us” (v. 4). The Judaizers were bringing the churches into

bondage through the Law (see 2:4; 3:13; 4:9). Christ's death has delivered us from this present evil age and has given us a new standing in liberty (5:1ff). No wonder Paul adds, "To whom be glory for ever and ever!" (v. 5)

May we never be confused as to the content and intent of the Gospel. The Gospel is not "follow Christ and imitate His life" but "receive Christ by faith and allow Him to set you free." There is no place in the Gospel for a salvation that is attained by keeping the Law.

II. Paul's Astonishment at Their Removal (1:6–10)

Two things astonished Paul: (1) that so soon after experiencing the blessing of salvation (3:1–5) they were turning away to another message; (2) that they would remove from him (Paul) who had suffered to bring Christ to them. The Gk. word for "removed" (v. 6) is a present participle—literally "removing." They were then in the process of turning from simple grace to a mixture of law and grace. In 5:4 Paul says, "You are fallen from [out of] grace" (NKJV). This did not imply they had lost their salvation, but rather that they had moved themselves out of the sphere of grace into the sphere of the Law. Grace means I depend on God to meet my needs; through the Law I try to handle matters by myself, in my own strength.

The apostle speaks forcefully in condemning any other gospel, regardless of who the preacher might be—even an angel! Keep in mind that there are many "gospels" (messages of good news), but only one Gospel of the grace of God as Paul preached it. Abraham believed "the gospel" (3:8), the "good news" that through his seed all the nations would be blessed. In every age, men have been saved by believing whatever promise God revealed to them. Noah believed God's Word about a flood and the ark; Abraham believed God's Word about his promised seed; today we believe God's Word about His Son's death and resurrection. Since the advent of Paul and the revelation of justification by faith, there is no other Gospel. The "Gospel of the kingdom" that was emphasized from Matt. 3 to Acts 7 is not our message today.

III. Paul's Argument for His Ministry (1:11–24)

In these verses, Paul seeks to show how he was completely independent of the Twelve and the assembly in Jerusalem.

A. He received his Gospel personally from Christ (vv. 11–14).

Paul saw the risen Christ (Acts 9) and received his commission and message directly from Him. This experience qualified him to be an apostle. Paul was never meant to be the twelfth apostle to replace Judas (Acts 1:16–26). For one thing, Paul could not have met the qualifications; also God deliberately kept Paul separated from the Twelve so no one could accuse Paul of borrowing his message. Nobody could accuse Paul of inventing his message, because he had been a persecutor of the church, not a friend. His life was radically changed after he met Christ on the Damascus road. The only way to explain such a remarkable transformation is to accept the fact that Paul met Christ.

B. He received his Gospel apart from the apostles (vv. 15–17).

Again let it be said that God never meant for Paul to belong to the Twelve. Their ministry was primarily to the Jews and was related to the kingdom; Paul's ministry was to the Gentiles and was related to the mystery of the church, the one body. The Twelve received their call from Christ on earth because their message presented the hope of Israel's earthly kingdom. Paul received his call from heaven, because his message presented the "heavenly calling" of the church in Christ. There were twelve apostles, associated with the twelve tribes. Paul was one man (and a Jew with Gentile citizenship) representing the one body in Christ.

Paul did not confer with men after he received his calling. Had he met immediately with the Twelve, people could have said that he borrowed his message and received his authority from them. Instead, God sent Paul to Arabia for a time of meditation and investigation. Someone has said, "Paul went to Arabia with the Law and the prophets and came out with Romans and Galatians!" Like Moses and Elijah before him, Paul went to the desert to wrestle with God's program and plan for his life. Then he went back to Damascus where he had first witnessed for Christ.

C. He received acknowledgement for his Gospel from the churches (vv. 18–24).

The believers there were actually afraid of Paul; and were it not for Barnabas, Paul would never have been accepted. This fact in itself proved that Paul had never leaned on the Jerusalem church for approval. After this visit, he went to Syria (Antioch). His ministry there is recorded in Acts 11:22–30; but he was personally unknown to the believers in Judea. However, the churches there heard the wonderful news of Paul's conversion and glorified God.

How tragic it is today that men reject Paul's revelation of the Gospel and try to mix law and grace. They try to "fit" Paul into the early chapters of Acts where the kingdom program is still emphasized. They are robbing Paul to pay Peter! We need to get back to the simple message of grace, the Gospel of Jesus Christ alone. To mix church and kingdom, law and grace, Peter and Paul is to create confusion and "twist" (pervert—1:7) the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Galatians 2

In the first chapter, Paul proved that his Gospel and apostleship came directly from Christ, independent of the Twelve. His readers would naturally ask, "Then what was Paul's relationship to the Twelve and the Jerusalem church?" He answers that question in this chapter.

I. His Gospel Was Approved By the Apostles (2:1–10)

Fourteen years after Paul's visit to Jerusalem (Acts 9:26–29), he was back in the "holy city" to attend a council on the problem of law and grace (Acts 15). Paul went to this conference "by revelation"; that is, Christ personally directed him to go, just as He had personally given him the Gospel years before (1:11–12). Paul had been ministering

among the Gentiles; he and Barnabas had seen many Gentiles saved and many local churches established; now the fate of the Gentile ministry was being discussed by the church leaders. Read Acts 15 again for the account of this important conference.

Some have suggested that there were four different meetings involved: (1) a public meeting, at which Paul recounted what God had done among the Gentiles, Acts 15:4; (2) Paul's private meeting with the leaders, Gal. 2:2; (3) the public debate of Acts 15:5 and Gal. 2:3–5; and (4) the council session at which the matter was finally settled, Acts 15:6ff.

Paul met with the leaders privately, but not because he was afraid his message was wrong. He knew his message was the right one because it had come from Jesus. Rather, he met with them privately to keep out the "spies" (2:4) and to avoid any open disagreements that would only add fuel to the fire.

Titus was with Paul, and, being a Gentile, was uncircumcised. According to the Judaizers, Titus was not even saved (Acts 15:1)! But the church leaders did not compel Titus to be circumcised; so, Paul concludes, this proves that circumcision has nothing to do with salvation. There were false brethren there, people who wanted to rob the believers of the glorious liberty they have in Christ. This party must have argued for Titus' circumcision, but Paul "beat them down." The group was divided: some were for legalism; some were for liberty; some were for a compromise between the two. The church today is still divided, with some teaching salvation by ritual; others insisting on mixing law and grace. The minority hold to Paul's Gospel of the grace of God.

The conclusion of the matter was that the church leaders agreed that Paul's message and ministry were of God, and that he should minister to the Gentiles while Peter and the Twelve ministered to the Jews. In v. 8, Paul is careful to point out that the same Spirit who worked in Paul worked in Peter as well. Both had the same message and the same Spirit but were responsible for different spheres of ministry. The council added nothing to Paul's message (v. 6), and endorsed it as well. Paul had preserved the "truth of the Gospel" (2:5) from the lies of the enemy.

II. His Gospel Was Defended before Peter (2:11–21)

Paul was right in ignoring the "spiritual positions" of the people mentioned in v. 6. Even the best leaders can make mistakes, and Paul cites Barnabas and Peter as examples. After the Jerusalem conference, Peter had visited the Gentile church at Antioch where Paul and Barnabas were still ministering (Acts 15:35). In Acts 10, God had clearly revealed to Peter that no foods or peoples were unclean; but the apostle fell back into legalism just the same. When he first came to Antioch, Peter mingled with the Gentiles and ate with them; but after some visitors came from Jerusalem, he withdrew himself and put up the old Jewish barriers again. Even Barnabas fell into the trap (v. 13), amazing his missionary companion, Paul. The reason was fear (v. 12); for "the fear of man brings a snare" (Prov. 29:25, NKJV).

Peter and Barnabas were not walking uprightly. What we believe determines how we behave. Because Peter and Barnabas were confused about spiritual truth, they were unable to walk a straight line. The "truth of the Gospel" is not only something for us to defend (v. 5), but it is also something for us to practice (v. 14). In vv. 14–21 we have a

summary of the rebuke Paul gave to Peter. Certainly Paul said more than this, but the following digest summarizes the matter very well:

“You are a Jew,” said Paul to Peter, “but you used to live like the Gentiles, with no barriers between you and other Christians. Now you want the Gentiles to live like Jews, doing what you did not even do yourself!”

The “we” in vv. 15–17 refers, of course, to the Jews. “We Jews have had special privileges and may not be guilty of Gentile sins; but we are saved the same way they are!” We would expect Paul to say, “They must be saved the way we are,” but he reverses the order. Salvation did not mean that Gentiles had to become like Jews, but that the Jews had to go to the level of the condemned Gentiles! “We are justified—given a right standing before God—by faith in Jesus Christ,” argues Paul. “The works of the law will never justify a man. Was any Jew ever saved by keeping the law? Of course not!”

In vv. 17–18, Paul showed Peter the folly of going back to the Law. “You say you have been saved by faith in Christ. Well, if you go back to the Law, you are confessing that you are still a sinner needing to be saved and that Christ did not save you. In fact, you are saying that your faith in Christ made you a sinner again, and that makes Christ the minister of sin!” To turn back to the Law denies the work of Christ on the cross. “You preached the Word to the Gentiles yourself,” Paul went on, referring to Acts 10, “but now you have changed your mind. You preached salvation by faith; now you preach salvation by law. You are building up the very things you once tore down, which makes you a sinner, because you tore down something that God wanted to keep standing.” In other words, Paul showed Peter the inconsistency of his actions and his beliefs.

“The Law is not a way of life, Peter; it is a way of death. The Law kills us (v. 19) that the Gospel might raise us up again. A Christian is not someone who is trying to obey an outward law. A Christian is one who has the living Christ within. By faith, I am united to Christ forever. When He died, I died; when He arose, I arose with Him. He lives out His life through me as I walk by faith—this is the Christian life! It is not a set of rules and regulations. To go back to the Law is to frustrate (make empty) the grace of God! If the Law is God’s way of salvation, then Christ died in vain!”

Neither Galatians nor Acts records Peter’s response, but we know that Paul’s rebuke accomplished its purpose. In fact, one of the last admonitions Peter wrote was that believers should read Paul’s letters to find God’s truth about this present age (2 Peter 3:16–18).

Galatians 3

Chapters 3–4 are doctrinal, for in them Paul explains the relationship between law and grace. Three words that are repeated frequently are faith (fourteen times), law (nineteen times) and promise (eleven times). Paul presents six arguments, three in each chapter, seeking to prove that salvation is by grace, through faith, apart from the works of the Law.

I. The Personal Argument (3:1–5)

Paul began with the Galatians' own personal experience with Christ, for this is one of the best evidences of how God works. Paul had preached Christ crucified, not obedience to the Law; this message they believed, and it changed their lives. They had received the Spirit (the evidence of salvation, Rom. 8:9) by the hearing of faith, and by believing the Word of God (Eph. 1:13–14), not by obeying some law. Certainly the Gospel Paul preached, the Gospel that changed his life and their lives, was the true message. For them to go back to the Law after all the Spirit had done for them was to act like fools!

They had willingly suffered for their faith. Through the gifts of the Spirit, the ministers in the Galatians' church were doing wonderful works, works that could never be done through the Law. Everything in their personal experience pointed to one fact: salvation is by grace, not by law.

Christians today need the truth of v. 3, for many feel that the same Spirit who saved them is not able to keep them or help them live for Christ. They have the idea that salvation is by grace through faith, but that living the Christian life depends on their own strength. How wrong this is! Romans 7 teaches clearly that believers cannot do anything of themselves to please God; Rom. 8 teaches that the Spirit continues the work of grace and fulfills the demands of the Law in us.

II. The Scriptural Argument (3:6–14)

By "scriptural" we are not suggesting that Paul's other arguments were not true to the Word, but rather that in this section he appeals strongly to the OT. In fact, you will want to check each of these references and contexts carefully.

A. Verses 6–7 quote Gen. 15:6.

The Judaizers pointed to Abraham, the "father of the Jews," as their example, and Paul does the same thing. How was Abraham saved? By faith! And all who trust Christ are children of Abraham, the father of the believing. See Rom. 4:1–8 for an amplification of this argument.

B. Verses 8–9 quote Gen. 12:3.

God promised to bless the heathen (Gentiles) through Abraham, which means that Jews and Gentiles are saved the very same way. The "gospel" that Abraham believed was certainly not the full Gospel of the grace of God that we preach today; even the apostles did not fully understand the meaning of Christ's death until it was explained to them. The gospel Abraham believed was the good news that God would bless Abraham and make him a mighty nation. Abraham believed this promise and this faith was accounted for righteousness.

C. Verse 10 quotes Deut. 27:26.

"You want to be saved by the works of the law? But the law does not save—it curses!"

D. Verse 11 quotes Hab. 2:4.

We have met this verse before: "The just shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:17; Heb. 10:38). This little verse from Habakkuk is so rich that God wrote three NT commentaries on it!

E. Verse 12 quotes Lev. 18:5.

There is a vast difference between “doing” and “believing”! Nobody was ever saved by doing the Law, because nobody can ever fully obey the Law.

F. Verses 13–14 quote Deut. 21:23.

The law puts us under a curse, but Christ died to remove that curse. He died on a tree (the cross—1 Peter 2:24) and fulfilled the word given in Deuteronomy. Because He has taken our curse upon Himself, we are free to live in Christ. The blessing God promised Abraham is now available to the Gentiles by faith.

Read again these six quotations and see how they prove conclusively that even the OT law itself taught that salvation is by grace, through faith.

III. The Logical Argument (3:15–29)

Of course, all of Paul’s arguments are logical. But the particular arguments here depend especially on reasoning, as Paul compares the Law to a human contract. “When two people make a contract, it is illegal for a third party to step in and change it or cancel it. Now, God made a contract (covenant) with Abraham four hundred years before the Law was given. The law of Moses could never cancel God’s original promise to Abraham. God gave that promise to Abraham’s seed as well, and v. 16 indicates that this Seed is Christ. The Mosaic law was not a new way of salvation that canceled God’s promises to Abraham; this would not be logical. Promise and faith go together, but not promise and law.

“But why then did God even give the Law?” his objectors would argue. Paul gave three answers:

A. The Law was temporary and only for Israel (vv. 19–20).

Rom. 2:14 and Acts 15:24 make it clear that God never gave the Law to the Gentiles. The moral law was already written in the Gentiles’ hearts (Rom. 2:15). But the ceremonial law (including the Sabbath laws) was never given to the Gentiles. The law was “added” and was not a replacement for the Abrahamic promises. Once the Seed (Christ) came, the Law was superseded. “But the Law was given with such glory!” the Judaizers would reply. “How can you say it was only temporary?” Paul is ready with an answer: the Law was given by angelic mediators, but God spoke personally to Abraham. God is one—and the fulfillment of His promise to Abraham depended on Him alone.

B. The Law convicted us of sin but never saved us from sin (vv. 21–22).

If there were a law that saved sinners, then God would have spared His Son and used that law instead of the cross. The Law is not contrary to God’s promises; by revealing sin, the law forces the sinner to trust God’s promises. Law shows us our need of grace; grace enables us to please God through faith. The Law places all under sin, which means that all can be saved by grace. If God permitted even one sinner to be saved by law, then no man could be saved by grace. All must be saved the same way.

C. The Law prepared the way for Christ (vv. 23–29).

“Before the faith we now know came, the law shut men up, revealing their need for a Savior.” As L.E. Maxwell has put it, “We were crowded to Christ!” The Law was God’s “schoolmaster” (tutor) for the Jews in their national infancy. The Greek and Roman tutor used to guard and teach the minor children until they reached legal adulthood, after which the children were on their own. The Law kept the Jews “in line,” so to speak, until Christ came and the full revelation of the Gospel was given to Jews and Gentiles.

Galatians 4

Paul continues with three more arguments to prove that salvation is by grace and not by law.

I. The Dispensational Argument (4:1–11)

Anyone who reads the Word carefully must admit that at different times, God deals in different ways with different people. When we speak of “dispensational truth,” we mean the truth of the Word as related to God’s program of the ages for Jews, Gentiles, and the church (1 Cor. 10:32). In this section, Paul explains that the period of Law was a dispensation, a special way in which God dealt with Israel for a special purpose. God never gave the Mosaic law to the Gentiles. To impose Jewish regulations on Gentiles (or even on Jews today) is totally unscriptural.

The Jews were heirs, for God had made wonderful promises to them through Abraham, but it took many centuries before they received these promises. Paul is continuing his comparison between the situation of the Jews and the tutelage of the Roman or Greek child. The child, Paul reasons, might be heir to a fortune, but so long as he or she has not reached the legal age of inheritance, the child is no different from the slave. Even so, the Jews were in their “spiritual childhood” under the law. The rules and rituals of the Law were the “religious ABCs” they had to learn before they could graduate into their full inheritance. This legalism was bondage to the Mosaic system (“elements of the world”—see Col. 2:8, 20). But this dispensation of law ran its course, having prepared the way for Christ. Christ was born at the right time, in the right manner (of a woman—a virgin birth), and for the right purpose—to set us free. Christ was made under the Law, obeyed the Law, and fulfilled the Law in His life and death. His death on the cross set the Jews free from their legalistic bondage and opened the way for the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham.

Had Israel received its Messiah when Peter presented Him at Pentecost (and again throughout Acts 2–7), the nation would have entered into its adulthood. The blessing would have flowed out to the Gentiles through Israel, and the Abrahamic promises would have been fulfilled. The nation collectively rejected Christ, but God in His grace opened the blessings up to Jews and Gentiles alike on an individual basis. The Gentiles were not saved through Israel’s rise, but through Israel’s fall (read Rom. 11:1–12). Now, individual Jews have received their adoption—their “son-placing,” as mature, grown-up

children in God’s family. They are no longer little children under the guidance of tutors; believers are sons, not servants, enjoying the full inheritance in Christ.

Paul now applies his argument: “Why do you want to go back into bondage, into a second childhood? Leave the ABCs and enjoy the full inheritance that you have in Christ!”

II. The Sentimental Argument (4:12–18)

“Brethren, I beseech you!” This is the appeal of a loving spiritual servant, a concerned father addressing his spiritual children. “I became as one of you when I first preached to you,” writes Paul; “now become as I am and be true to Christ.” He reminds them that it was through some physical affliction that he first came to them, and that they had then treated him like an angel. Now they treated him like an enemy because he was telling them the truth. “Your false teachers make a big show of their love for you (“zealously affect you”—v. 17), but their motives are not pure. They want to use you to show off their spiritual conquests!” (See 6:12–14.)

III. The Allegorical Argument (4:19–31)

An allegory is an event or story that has a hidden meaning. Paul uses the story of Abraham’s two sons (Gen. 16 and 21) to show that the new covenant of grace has superseded the old covenant of law. We may illustrate the contrasts in this way:

The Old Covenant of Law	The New Covenant of Grace
1. Symbolized by Hagar the slave-girl	1. Symbolized by Sarah, the free woman
2. Ishmael, a son born after the flesh	2. Isaac, a son born miraculously by God’s promise
3. Represents Jerusalem in Paul’s day, still in spiritual (and political) bondage	3. Represents the heavenly Jerusalem which is free and glorious

We Christians are children of promise, like Isaac (v. 23), and therefore children of liberty (v. 31). God had promised Abraham a son long before Ishmael was born. Ishmael “was added” (like the Law, 3:19) and was a son of the flesh, a slave’s son. The old covenant of law was never God’s final plan for Israel. It was added, like Ishmael, and brought bondage and sorrow. God’s commandment to Abraham was to cast out Ishmael and Hagar! Law and grace, faith and works, promise and commandment, can never live in the same household. The Judaizers in Galatia wanted to invite Hagar and Ishmael back into the family again!

Paul refers to Isa. 54:1 and applies this verse to the church. Just as Sarah was barren and had to wait for many years for her son, so the Jews had to wait many years before God’s promises to Abraham were fulfilled. Isaiah described the joy of Jerusalem after the return from exile. Paul sees a deeper meaning: joy in the church in spite of its persecution and suffering.

The danger Paul saw in Galatia is with us today. The flesh loves and craves “religious excitement” and feels gratified when it can keep some religious law. While

there is nothing wrong with church traditions that are tied to Scripture and magnify Christ, we must beware of inviting Hagar and Ishmael back into the family. There can be no mixture of law and grace. May God help us to hold fast to His simple grace.

Galatians 5

We now move into the final section of the letter in which Paul makes the practical application of Christian liberty to the lives of believers in a series of four contrasts.

I. Liberty, Not Bondage (5:1–15)

“Your doctrine of grace and liberty is dangerous!” Paul’s enemies argued. “Why, if Christians are free from the Law, they will live wicked lives! We need the Law to control them!” So people have argued down through the centuries, little realizing that grace, not law, is the greatest teacher and “controller” in the world (Titus 2:11–12).

Paul admonishes us to stand fast in our Christian liberty. If we step back into legalism, we risk entanglement and bondage. How well the Jews of Paul’s day knew what legal bondage meant (Acts 15:10). Circumcision was the seal of the old covenant, so Paul warns the Galatians that to turn back to the old covenant is to rob themselves of the blessings Christ had purchased for them. Christ cannot profit the sinner who rejects grace and trusts law; Christ cannot profit the saint who seeks to live by law instead of grace. “Circumcision” in vv. 2–3 stands for the entire Mosaic system. People who put themselves under the Law become debtors to the whole system.

“Fallen from grace” (v. 4) does not mean “fallen from salvation.” Paul is not writing to people who have “lost their salvation” because such a thing is not possible. He is writing to saints who have moved out of the sphere of grace into the burdensome sphere of law. Watchman Nee says, “Law means I must do something for God; grace means that God does something for me.” How wonderful it is for the Christian to enjoy the liberty of grace! This means moving out of the bondage described in Romans 7 into the glorious liberty of Romans 8! Paul describes the true Christian walk in vv. 5–6: our power is in the Spirit; we receive this power by faith; this faith produces love and works in our lives. In other words, the doctrine of Christian liberty does not encourage a wicked life; instead, it binds us closer to Christ, and Christ lives out His life through the believer (2:20).

How did such false teaching get into the Galatians’ lives? Just the way yeast (leaven) gets into good meal. Leaven is always compared to that which is evil (cf. Matt. 13:33; 1 Cor. 5:1–7). The false doctrine was planted as a little bit of leaven in the church, but then it grew and infected the whole body. The Galatians had run well up to that point; now they were being hindered in their Christian walk.

Paul then points to himself and reminds them of how he had suffered to preach the Gospel. His enemies were probably lying about him and saying that he actually did preach circumcision (that is, obedience to the OT law). But, Paul argues, that if he was preaching legalism, the Jews would never have persecuted me! “The offense of the

cross” (v. 11) means the stumbling block of the cross to the Jews (1 Cor. 1:23–25), who could not accept a crucified Savior. Using circumcision as an example, Paul says, “I wish they were cut off who trouble you!”

Paul closes this section with the reminder that liberty is not license. “By love serve one another,” he says. We fulfill the law when we live in love (Rom. 13:8–10). The Christian who says, “I have liberty to sin!” understands nothing of the cross or of God’s grace.

II. The Spirit, Not the Flesh (5:16–26)

Paul’s first admonition was “Stand fast!” Now he says, “Walk in the Spirit!” Our standing in Christ determines our walk in Christ. The words “flesh” and “Spirit” are each found ten times in chapters 5–6. Those who live according to law depend on the energy of the flesh; those who live by grace depend on the power of the Spirit. To “walk in the Spirit” means to have our daily lives under His control, and this means under the direction of the Word of God. To be “led of the Spirit” means to be delivered from a life of bondage to legalism. The elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15) lived in bondage and had no joy in his walk or service. How many Christians are like him!

“The flesh” refers to the fallen nature still with the believer. The body itself is not sinful; appetites are not necessarily sinful, but the tendencies of the old nature are downward. In Romans 6, Paul tells us that the old man has been crucified and that we can overcome the flesh by reckoning ourselves dead to sin and by yielding ourselves to God. Here in Galatians, Paul spells out the conflict between the believer’s two natures. Immediately after conversion, new Christians enjoy several days or weeks of wonderful victory; then temptation and defeat come, and they become discouraged. Somebody should have told them that the old nature would rise up again! The last phrase in v. 17 does not teach that the believer cannot get victory. The phrase should be translated, “so that you may not do what you would.” That is, mere determination on the part of the Christian will never control the flesh or produce the fruit of the Spirit. Paul amplifies this theme in Rom. 7, where he shows that the believer’s determined attempts to please God in his own strength are destined to fail.

What a contrast between works and fruit! Fruit is the result of a living union; a machine may produce works, but it can never produce fruit. Even the Law produces works, but God calls them dead works (Heb. 6:1). The Law could never produce the gracious fruit described here. Read this list of “flesh works” in a modern version to get the full import of their meaning. What a terrible catalog of sins! How many of them are found even among Christians!

Christian character comes from within, by the power of the Spirit. The Spirit seeks to transform us into Christ’s likeness (2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 8:29 and 12:1–2). We could meditate for hours on the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit! Note especially that love heads the list. Paul clearly states that no law could ever produce this kind of character. When will people learn that making resolutions will never sanctify them!

“If we live in the Spirit” (this is salvation, being made alive by the Spirit), “let us also walk in the Spirit” (this is sanctification, allowing the Spirit to command and control our lives). Compare Eph. 5:18–24 with Col. 3:15–19 and you will see that to be filled with the Spirit is to be controlled by the Word of God, for the results are identical. “Walking in

the Spirit” is not some emotional experience, detached from everyday life. It is the daily experience of the believer who feeds on the Word, prays, and obeys what the Bible says.

In closing, note that Paul uses three pleas as he beseeches these Christians to live lives of holiness by the grace of God: God the Father has called them (v. 13); God the Son has died for them (v. 24); and God the Holy Spirit indwells them (vv. 16–23). Each Person of the Trinity is assisting us in our battle against the flesh.

Galatians 6

In this final chapter, Paul presents two more contrasts in the Christian life. Keep in mind that he is describing the spiritual life of the believer who lives under grace and not under law. It is a life of liberty, not bondage (5:1–15), and one that is lived in the Spirit, not in the flesh (5:16–26).

I. Others, Not Self (6:1–10)

There is a law that the believer obeys; it is the law of love in Christ. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34, NKJV). The Spirit of God is the Spirit of love, for God is love. If we are walking in the Spirit, we will not use our liberty in Christ for selfish purposes; we will allow the Spirit to work through us to help others. “Others” is the great Gospel word! Jesus lived for others, and we must follow His example. Being free from the Law does not mean we are independent of one another, for we are members of the same family, and we minister to each other.

A. *Spiritual help* (vv. 1–5).

Suppose a believer is suddenly caught by the enemy and falls into sin. (Or it may be that the word “overtaken” suggests being caught in sin and found out by other believers.) Should our attitude be one of judgment and condemnation? No! If we are spiritual (walking in the Spirit, led by the Spirit, bearing fruit through the Spirit), we will seek to restore the fallen one. This Gk. word for “restore” is a medical term used for the setting of a broken bone. Christians are members of Christ’s body, and a Christian in sin weakens the body. Of course, if the person does not submit to restoration, then the measures of discipline outlined in Matt. 18 and 1 Cor. 5 must be considered.

We are to bear each other’s burdens, but we must also bear our own burdens. See Paul’s words to the Galatians in Gal. 6:1–5. There are some burdens that we can share with others, but there are also some that we alone can carry. To avoid my own responsibilities while seeking to help another is to sin. There must be the spirit of meekness as we seek to help others, not thinking we are better than they. Let God do the judging and the rewarding; He never makes a mistake.

B. Material help (vv. 6–10).

The believer who listens to the Word should share material blessings with those who teach; this is the lesson of vv. 6–8. We often apply these verses to reaping what we sow in terms of sin, and certainly this principle is true. But the basic lesson here is that of giving; “communicate” in v. 6 simply means “to share.” This principle is stated in Rom. 15:27; where we receive spiritual blessings, we have the privilege and obligation of sharing material blessings. “Sowing to the flesh” means living for the flesh, investing time and money on things that will not last; “sowing to the Spirit” means spending time and money on things eternal. How many Christians use their time and money (and money is merely time minted so we can spend it again) on things fleshly—and they wonder why they never grow in grace or reap spiritual fruits! Certainly it takes faith and patience to sow to the Spirit, but God promises the harvest in due season. It takes time to grow a spiritual harvest. We must be faithful sowers in our activities.

II. God’s Glory, Not Man’s Approval (6:11–18)

To the very end of the letter, Paul has grace in mind. The Christian who depends on grace, through the Spirit, will always bring glory to God; the legalist who “practices religion” will earn the approval of men. How the world honors “religious people” and hates the dedicated Christian!

Paul usually used a secretary when he wrote, dictating the letter, and then adding his personal “grace signature” to the end (1 Cor. 16:21–24; Col. 4:18; 2 Thes. 3:17–18). But apparently he wrote Galatians personally, and, because of his poor eyesight (note Gal. 4:15) had to write in large letters. “How large a letter” does not mean the number of words, because the letter is relatively brief; it means the size of the individual letters. Paul did not permit his physical handicap to hinder him from obeying God and warning his Christian friends of the evils of legalism.

“These Judaizers want to use you for their glory,” Paul asserts (v. 12). “They are not ministering to you for your good, but for their own praise. They want to avoid the persecution that comes to those who preach the cross. But they do not even obey the law themselves!” What a stinging rebuke! These Judaizers, like the Pharisees of Christ’s day, would cross land and sea to make a convert (Matt. 23:15), not to help the convert, but to add more glory to their own names. But Paul was not of this type: he gloried in the cross and willingly took all of the shame and persecution that was attached to it. Paul could glory in the cross because he knew the Person of the cross, the purpose of the cross, and the power of the cross.

Again, Paul mentions his own crucifixion (6:14, see 2:20). Salvation means Christ died for me—substitution; sanctification means I died with Christ—identification. “These false teachers belong to the world and are living for the world,” states the apostle. “The world has no attraction for me: I have been crucified to the world, and the world has been crucified to me.” Today, the cross is often a polished piece of jewelry; back in Paul’s day, the cross was a shameful instrument of pain and death. “Religion” has made the cross a symbol; the Spirit makes the cross a reality in the life of the Christian who lives by grace.

The Christian belongs to a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17), the “true Israel of God” (v. 16). This does not mean that the NT church has taken the place of OT Israel, for in

Christ there are no racial distinctions (3:28). Rather, Paul is saying that these Judaizers are not a part of the true Israel, the real people of God. Gentiles who receive Christ as Savior are not children of Abraham genetically, but spiritually (3:7). The church today is the true Israel of God, because God's ancient people have been set aside temporarily in unbelief and are termed "not my people" (Hosea. 1:9–10; 2:23; Rom. 9:25–26). One day Israel will become God's people and inherit their national promises.

The "rule" we are to walk by is that of grace and the new creation in Christ. How many well-meaning but ignorant Christians are walking by a different rule, trying to "bring in the kingdom" or reform the world.

With one sweep of the pen, Paul brushes away these legalistic troublemakers. "Your false teachers are marked with circumcision," he writes, "but I have on my body the marks [brands] of Jesus Christ." This does not mean Paul had five wounds on his body similar to Christ's wounds; it means rather that he had scars on his body to prove that he bore reproach for the cross of Christ. In Paul's day, men branded soldiers, slaves, and people who dedicated themselves to a god. Paul was Christ's soldier, slave, and devoted follower.

What a wonderful benediction: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit!" (v. 18)