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Why Did Jesus Die?

A Study of the Epistle of Galatians

Galatians 2:11-21

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One of the big problems when we talk about legalism is: it's so easy to see it in others and so hard to see it in ourselves. The legalist is always somebody else. When we read through the Gospels, we read about those naughty Pharisees but we never identify ourselves as a Pharisee. It's always *"those guys"*. I found over the years when talking about legalism, it's always very helpful to start with the assumption: I am a legalist, but I don't want to be…and then move from there.

Last week we were comforted by the conclusion of the Jerusalem Council that salvation is by grace through faith alone. One of the most effective, impassioned speeches at the Jerusalem Council was delivered by the Apostle Peter. He concluded his speech by saying, "It's obvious both Jew and Gentile are saved by grace alone and we are both equal—all equal in the eyes of God." If there's one person at that council that clearly got it, it was Peter, which is why we are shocked by what we find in our text in Galatians this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Galatians, Chapter 2. We pick it up in verse 11:

> **But when Cephas** (which would be Peter) **came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.** (*NASB, Galatians 2:11)

Peter probably went to Antioch just to celebrate what God was doing in the lives of the Gentiles. He had heard the reports at the Jerusalem Council and probably just wanted to see it for himself, probably the best of intentions. But when Paul gets there, he publicly confronts Peter. Now just think about this: This confrontation between Peter and Paul—this is a bit oversimplified—but basically, you could say the first half of the book of Acts is about Peter; the second half of the book of Acts is about Paul. Now we have these two great Christian leaders in a public confrontation. When the text says **because he stood condemned**, that word does not mean accused; it means *a pronouncement of judgment*. We might use the word *busted.* In other words, the language would mean *his own behavior condemned him*. There's no way to wiggle out of this. He was clearly guilty. So what's the issue? Verse 12:

> **For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he *began* to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision.**

So let's start with what was happening. Peter was eating with the Gentiles. The verb tense would say he was eating with the Gentiles as a habit, as a way of life. He'd been there for some time, and he was probably thoroughly enjoying his newfound freedom to rejoice with his brothers and sisters in Christ who were Gentiles. Now that may not seem like a big deal to us, but you have to understand the background. The Jewish people considered the Gentiles to be unclean—they were contaminated. They were to have no contact with them. They didn't socialize with them; they didn't talk with them, and they certainly didn't eat with them. Eating in a first century culture was a very high level of identity. It was to *be accepted*. It was a high level of community. It was actually a very big deal. In addition, the orthodox Jew had very complicated dietary rules that he or she followed. Now I don't want to go into some big complicated explanation of that, but in the most simple form, the dietary laws were simply, basically, symbolic to represent holiness, to represent

being set apart, to represent being clean when you enter into the presence of a holy God. And the dietary laws were taken very seriously by orthodox Jews so they certainly wouldn't eat with Gentiles. It just never happened.

When Jesus came on the scene in Mark, Chapter 7, it's recorded that Jesus basically abolished the dietary laws. He said, at the end of the day, what you eat really makes no difference in your position before God. What matters is your heart. And Mark even includes that Jesus, therefore, declared all foods clean. You also have this very interesting encounter in Acts, Chapter 10, where God appears to Peter in some sort of, kind of a vision trance, and tells Peter to "kill and eat" —in other words, to violate those dietary laws—because they are no longer in effect. And Peter responds dramatically, "Absolutely not!" And God literally has to command Peter three times, "Do what I'm telling you. Kill and eat!" before Peter would finally move beyond the dietary laws and do what God said. And I think the idea there was: until the Jews put these laws behind them, and entered into the grace of the new covenant, there would be no possibility for the Jews and the Gentiles to ever come together as one people, as one church. So God didn't say, "Peter, eat what you want." He said, "Kill it and eat it. Do what I'm telling you! We've got to break down some walls and bring the church together."

Now at this point, if you would permit me—it's not like you can stop me (laughter)—to go on a little bit of a rabbit trail here. One of the issues that often comes up related to legalism is the issue of communion. We talked about baptism last week. One other issue that often comes up is communion—the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist—whatever you call it. And the question is: Where is the legalism in that? Some traditions believe that the elements were purely symbolic. That would be us. Others say that the elements actually become the body and blood of Jesus. Others would say it *is* the body and blood of Jesus. Now there isn't legalism in *that*. The legalism is when you believe that by partaking of the elements of communion, you somehow merit favor with God; you become more acceptable to God—that that somehow contributes to your salvation. At that point, you've added a work to grace. And that's when it becomes problematic.

Now we hold the view that the elements of communion are symbolic, and there're lots of reasons for that. One is because, for thousands of years, the elements of Passover were symbolic. Nobody argues that point. Jesus took the elements of Passover and redefined them according to the new covenant. But there would need to be some reason why suddenly the elements are literal instead of symbolic as they had been for thousands of years. Some would say, "Well, it's obvious. Jesus said, 'This is my body'." But remember, when He said that, He was sitting there with them. They didn't suddenly cannibalize him. It's obvious it's symbolic. That word **is** sometimes means *is literally*, sometimes means *is symbolically*. It's used both ways many times in the Gospels. You can't make an argument one way or the other off that word. So you are left with trying to understand the bigger picture. Clearly they did not turn around and eat Jesus, so it seems fairly obvious it was symbolism. But relevant to our discussion this morning, one of the things that's very helpful to understand is the men that were gathered in the upper room when Jesus uttered those words, were orthodox Jews. Since the moment they were born, the dietary laws had been pounded into their heads. They simply did not violate those. And the idea of consuming human flesh and drinking human blood would have been so contrary to everything they've ever been taught, there would have been an uproar. There would have been a reaction just like Peter's in Acts, Chapter 10. At the very least, there would have been some discussion as to why, now suddenly, this is okay to do. But the fact that there was not even the slightest discussion would indicate they understood it to be symbolic, as Passover had been for thousands of years. Now, just to drive that point home: In Acts chapter 10, when God commands Peter to violate the dietary laws, to move on to the new covenant, this is now years after the establishment of the church. By this time, Peter would have participated in the

Lord's Supper hundreds, maybe thousands of times. Yet it's clear from Acts 10 that, in his mind, the dietary laws are still in effect. There's just no way you could make the argument that he still thought that the dietary laws were in effect but he thought he was consuming human flesh and drinking human blood. Clearly he understood it as symbolic; that's really the only way you can make sense of that. So putting together these texts, it helps to understand that's, I think, how they would have understood it.

Meanwhile, back in Galatians, Peter is enjoying his newfound freedom to fellowship, to find community with, to enjoy the Gentiles, and to eat their food and be one in Christ. This is one of the highpoints of the celebration of grace—until the legalists from Jerusalem arrive. Now there's no reason to think James had sent these legalists, or that James was aligned with them. It's basically a reference that they are coming from the Jerusalem church. It's helpful to understand that Antioch, this church where this took place, was not some fledgling church plant. Antioch was a very significant, established church. You might say it was the Apostle Paul's home church. It was the church that sent him on his missionary journeys. So this was an established, very influential church. Up come the Jewish legalists and, when that happens, the text tells us that Peter **began to withdraw and hold himself aloof**. He began to distance himself from the Gentiles and from their food and from the relationship and began to pull back until he was eating and fellowshipping with the Jews only. Now why did he do this? The text tells us—because of *fear* of the legalists. This is very helpful to understand. He didn't do this because he felt convicted. He didn't do this because he was led of the Spirit. He didn't do this for strategic reasons. He did it because he feared the judgment of the legalists.

Now, stop and think about how powerful this is. This is the Apostle Peter. Not so long before this, he was at the Jerusalem Council, making one of the most impassioned speeches for *salvation by grace through faith alone—Jews and Gentiles are one in Christ*. But the power of the legalists is so strong that even Peter becomes a legalist. If you're sitting there this morning thinking you're not vulnerable to legalism, I'm going to put you at the top of my list of people most likely to become a legalist. We are all vulnerable to legalism.

I mentioned last week that the motive of legalism—what it's about—is *control*. It's always about control. And the primary weapon of choice is fear. The legalists create an environment of fear—where you obey their rules or else. They position themselves as super-spiritual. While they may say very self-incriminating terms: "I'm terrible." "I'm a sinner saved by grace." "Oh, I'm bad!"… they actually seem to take great pride in how many ways they can describe themselves in negative terms. But it comes from a heart of pride, of self-righteousness. They position themselves as the super-spiritual—that they are more spiritual; they are more committed; they are more faithful; they love Jesus more; they are more courageous; they are more loyal. They identify the rest of the world of Christians as being very *worldly*, but there is a handful of them who are more faithful; they are more committed; they are more conservative; they are more willing to take a stand. And they create this persona that they are the super-spiritual. And then they began to judge other Christians based on this artificial standard that they have set up themselves. And if you don't abide by their standard, if you don't keep their rules, their ideas of right and wrong, their idea of activities that you must participate in, and activities you can't participate in, if you do not cooperate, then they judge you; then they keep score; then they look at you. And, somehow, you are not as spiritual; you are not as committed; you don't love Jesus as much; you are not as faithful. You are more worldly; you are not willing to take your stand; you are not counted among the faithful. And this culture of fear now begins to control people's behavior.

I would suggest to you that there are thousands and thousands and thousands of Christians in churches who everyday abide by certain standards, not because they have a heart-conviction, not because they have a passion for righteousness, not because they have a biblical understanding of the issue. As a matter of fact, I'd suggest to you most of these Christians couldn't begin to defend biblically why they do and don't do all these things. It's simply because of a culture of fear. And in a culture of fear, you follow the rules; you do what you're told. And we end up in bondage because the power of fear is great, just as it affected Peter. The result is we find ourselves in bondage—and there's no joy in that; there's no life in there. You tell me: when was the last time you met a joyful legalist? This just simply is not who they are. Verse 13:

> **The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.**

Now think about this. Peter gave this impassioned plea at the Jerusalem Council, and who was there representing the Gentiles and their salvation by grace through faith alone? It was Paul and Barnabas! Barnabas is at the council pleading for understanding related to the Gentile believers. But the fear of the circumcision was so powerful—the fear of the legalists—that even Barnabas who was responsible for leading these people to Christ, turns his back on them and sides with the Jewish legalists. You just can't underestimate the power of legalism to control our lives. Paul identifies it as **hypocrisy**, meaning *you are proclaiming a message of salvation by grace through faith; we are all equal before God, but their behavior is contrary to that*. They're saying one thing; they're living another. Their behavior is saying that the Jewish legalists are still a cut-above. This is the scandalous truth of grace. You, this morning, may be the worst sinner in the history of the world. But if, last night, you trusted Christ as Savior, you stand equal in your righteousness before God with some Christian who's been a Christian for fifty years. Because you do not stand in the basis of your own performance; you stand clothed in the righteousness of Christ. There simply is no Christian that's *more than* or *less than* in the eyes of God. Having a strong theology of grace not only changes the way I view myself, but it changes the way I view others. We stand together as one, equal in righteousness before God because of grace. Verse 14:

> **But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel…**

It's a very interesting statement. What he's saying is their behavior was not in alignment with the message of the gospel. The message of the gospel was salvation by grace through faith. Their behavior was *other than* that. When you embrace legalism and you start thinking there are those that are *more than* and *less than* in the eyes of God, you actually are changing the definition of the gospel, which now becomes a different gospel, and Paul calls them on it.

> **But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how *is it that* you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"** (Vs. 14)

So he's calling Peter on his hypocrisy. Now verses 15 and 16 are very important to understanding the core message of the book of Galatians.

> **"We** [Paul's including himself] ***are*** **Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles;** (Vs. 15)

Now he's using the terminology of the legalistic Jews. It's a very similar argument that he makes in Romans, Chapter 2. He's saying, "Okay, we are Jews by birth, and we are not sinners from among

the Gentiles." The Jews, believing they were the people of God, considered everybody else to be sinners. So they were *the people of God* and *everybody else was a sinner*. Paul's using that language, and basically he's saying, "Okay, great. We're God's people by birth—Jews by birth—and we are not one of those nasty Gentile sinners." Good for you. Verse 16:

> **…nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus…**

The word **justified** was the key word in the book of Romans. It's a legal term. It means *to be declared right in a public courtroom*. When you trust Christ as Savior, you are declared to be righteous in the presence of God. This is not a process. The verb tense says it's a moment in time. It's a declaration from the moment you trust Christ as Savior for the rest of eternity, you are righteous in the presence of God because it's not based on your works; it's based on the righteousness of Christ. You are clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Throughout this section, it says the Law. But the **the**, the definite article, isn't actually in the Greek. I think it's more clear when you take that out. He's not just referring to the Law of Moses. He's referring to the principle of Law, in other words, works. Now I don't know how it gets any more clear than his statement **…a man is not justified by the works of Law but through faith in Christ Jesus…**but, just in case you slept through that, he says it again…

> **… so that we may be justified by faith in Christ Jesus and not by works of Law…**

Now just in case you perhaps missed it again, one more time:

> **… since by the works of Law no flesh will be justified.** (Vs. 16)

Three times, back to back, couldn't be more clear—we are justified by faith! We are justified by believing, not by works. Not by works…not by works! The only other place in the New Testament where I think there's that level of repetition would be Ephesians 2: No works! No works! No works! No works! And just in case your neighbor is sleeping, no works! I don't know how it gets more clear than that. Now there are some who would say, "Belief is a work." There're some who would say, "Faith is a work." Read the text! They are not works. He clearly says, "By believing, not works. By faith, not works." The text is saying faith and belief are non-works in biblical language. They're simply believing the work has been done. Jesus died for our sins.

The concern whenever we talk about grace—and I'm sure there was plenty of this conversation behind closed doors this past week—is that when we overemphasize grace, it turns into license. People will run wild. Understand what happens when you think that way: If that is genuinely your concern, you will shrink back from a glorious definition of grace for fear that if you overdo the grace thing, then people are going to run to sin. Let's remind ourselves that the ultimate purpose of salvation is to the praise of the glory of His grace—Ephesians 1. Grace is the deal! And when we shrink back from an all-out understanding and embracing of grace, what we are actually doing is minimizing the glory of God in our salvation because we are making grace something less than it is. Paul anticipates this question related to license. Verse 17:

> **"But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ** [which is grace], **we ourselves have also been found sinners, is Christ then a minister** [a promoter] **of sin?** (Vs. 17a)

So here's the logic. He is saying, "Okay, if grace is a license to sin, then we have actually said that Jesus is a promoter of sin!" And he responds with very strong terms—"Absolutely not!"

"… May it never be! (Vs. 17b)

No way! I would suggest to you there's absolutely no way a right understanding of grace becomes a license for sin. No way! If you are going to take that position, then you have said Jesus and His salvation is actually a promoter of sin. So what's the logic of that? Okay, verse 18:

> "**For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed** [meaning Law, meaning works as a means of salvation], **I prove myself to be a transgressor.**

In other words, works could not make me righteous *before* salvation. What makes me think they could make me righteous *after* salvation? Works didn't work before. They don't work after! So, if I tore down my belief that works could make me righteous before salvation, but now, after salvation I rebuild that theology, then all I've accomplished is that I've made myself **a transgressor**. What is he saying? He's saying if I revert back to a works theology, I actually cause myself to sin more. Now we learned this in Romans. The Law does not make us sin less; the Law makes us sin more! Why is that? Because, when I measure myself up against the Law, it's obvious I'm not measuring up—that I'm actually a sinner, that I'm failing every day. That now becomes my identity. The more I understand the Law, the more sinful I become, the more that becomes my identity. And if that's who I am, and that's what I think about, that's how I live. And you get into this sin spiral you can't get out of. This is the theology of the *Dark Room*—that I think when I sin I need to go to the dark room, and I need to beat myself up, and I need to have shame and guilt. And I need to stay there and work myself over and demonstrate to God how sorry I am for my sin, "I won't do it again, I promise." That is not the way out. It actually gets me locked in a cycle of sin. I see myself as failure, as a loser. I'm a sinner; I'm in the darkness and I stay in the darkness and, because that's who I am, that's how I live tomorrow. And it gets into the cycle where I'm stuck in this room of bondage and I can't get out. The logic is it didn't work before salvation; it won't work after salvation. There has to be a greater power at work. Verse 19:

> **"For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God.**

It was the Law; it was this theology of works that led me to the conclusion, "I can't do it: I can't measure up; I can't make myself holy. It's not working." And the result of that was I died to that way of thinking. I died to the idea that somehow I can merit favor with God on the basis of my works. I died to that in order to find another way. And the only option left on the table was grace. And there, in an economy of grace, I discovered this gift of salvation, this life where I became alive in God and was exposed to a new power that had the power to set me free. It's what he's saying there. Verse 20:

> **"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me…**

This is Romans 6, 7, and 8. We talked about this: The old man died. How dead is he? He's so dead we buried him. The old boy's gone—never to come back! This is why I think it's foolish to think you can lose your salvation. You can't go back. There is no *back*! The old boy is dead and gone. He died; the moment I trust Christ as Savior, I identify with the crucifixion of Christ. I am crucified with Christ. It's no longer me. It's not me held in bondage to this sin nature, but now it's Christ that lives in me. It's Christ that has now become my very nature. It's a radical new birth. I am a new creation in Christ. That changes everything. I do not believe it is possible that you can be a Christian and sin as a way of life with no conviction. That is not an issue of cheap grace; it's an issue of not understanding the message of the gospel, of not experiencing true life-change. If the

life that's in me is now the life of Christ, how does that life not experience conviction to sin? It has to!

But that message is for each of us to assess our own hearts. You cannot assess somebody else's. This is where we get into trouble. You can't start trying to figure out if somebody else is truly saved or not. And based on that, we start deciding which sins are acceptable and which sins are not. And that always is a legalistic path. But you yourself have to understand: if you have truly experienced new life in Christ, then that new life shows itself in a conviction to sin and a desire to do the right thing. Now I would suggest to you that the overwhelming majority of people in this auditorium this morning do not sin as a way of life with no conviction. It's just the opposite. When we sin, it grieves us. We feel the conviction of that. We feel like failures, like I'm not living up, like I'm not being a good Christian; I'm not doing what God has called me to do. And we feel the shame and guilt of that—it bothers us a lot. The problem is we get stuck in the *dark room* and we beat ourselves up. And we have shame; we have guilt. We are trying to convince God, "I'm so sorry; I'll never do it again." But that is basically works. It didn't work before; it didn't work after. That's not the way out. What is the way out? Well, he tells us:

> **"…it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh** [meaning as a human] **I live by faith** [by faith, okay, what do I believe?] **in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself up for me.** (Vs. 20)

That, on my best days and my worst days, I choose to believe this radical scandalous thing called grace—that the Son of God actually loves me and that He gave Himself for me in order that I might have life, in order that I might have a way out, in order that I might experience a power greater than my own power to set me free from the bondage of sin. I don't find that in the *dark room*. I find it in the *light room*. I find it in the presence of Jesus. On my worst days I run into the light room; I jump into the lap of Jesus and I know that He loves me and He accepts me and He celebrates me and He forgives me and I stand in the righteousness of Christ. And there my soul is brought back to life and my eyes are fixed on Jesus and I'm re-aligned, and I'm re-impassioned about righteousness and I understand I got off the track, but I'm back on, and I'm not going to do that tomorrow by the power of the Spirit. That's a whole different way of understanding the Christian life. Verse 21 is very sober:

> "**I do not nullify the grace of God** [in other words, I don't get stuck in the dark room; I celebrate the grace of God], **for if righteousness *comes* through the Law** [works], **then Christ died needlessly**."

In other words, if even as a Christian I can go to the *dark room* and somehow be so shameful, somehow be so repentant, somehow be so sorry that I can turn it around and merit righteousness with God, there was no reason for Jesus to die. You can do it yourself. But if you died to that way of thinking, then the answer is not in the *dark room.* That's what you've died to. It's in *the light*. If you can do it yourself, there was no reason for Jesus to die. Jesus actually asked this question in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Father, if there's any other way…" The fact that He died on the cross was the answer—there is no other way, but only by the power and grace of God.

It's so important to understand: if we think grace is going to turn to license, then we make grace something less. We diminish it; we shrink from it and then we create a theology of the *dark room* and we've got to repent and get beat up and feel shame and somehow convince God I'm worthy to be forgiven. I'm really sorry but that locks us in a cycle of sin after sin after sin. It's simply does not produce righteousness. But when we understand this thing called grace—that I'm a new person;

I'm a new creation; it's His life in me—and now the life I live is actually His life in me and I believe by faith that He loves me, and that He gave Himself for me and, on my best days and on my worst days, He invites me by grace to run to the *Light* and find my life *in Him*.

I can explain this to you—but I cannot believe this for you. I want this so bad for all of us but I can't believe it for you. You have to believe yourself. Do you believe God tells the truth when He says you have been crucified with Christ and it's no longer you who live but Christ who lives in you? The life that you now live, you live by faith, believing in the Son of God who loved you and gave Himself for you and I would add, on your best days and on your worst days, longs to dance with you.

Our Father, we are thankful for this scandalous thing called grace. Lord, it's just so hard to comprehend because it's so other than anything we've ever known. Lord, help us to understand grace is the power of the gospel. It is the life of Christ in us that empowers us now to live in a way we never could have lived before. Lord, give us minds to understand and believe. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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Sept. 21/22, 2013

Study Questions
Why Did Jesus Die?

Free Indeed: A Study in the Epistle of Galatians
Galatians 2:11-21

Opening Discussion

1. Are you a legalist? Why or why not?

2. Did Jesus have to die for us to be saved? Why or why not? Is there any other way?

3. Does grace create a license to sin? Explain.

Bible Study

1. Read Galatians 2:1-21

2. Read Acts 10:1 - 11:18. What does God teach Peter? How hard was it for Peter to get this? Why?

   How does Peter defend himself when he is confronted for eating with Gentiles?

3. Peter's experience in Acts 10 and 11 precedes the events in Antioch described in Galatians 2. What happened to Peter?

   Was it a lack of understanding? Was it a lack of knowledge?

   Can you identify times as a Christian when you were motivated more by fearing the legalists than by the Spirit of Jesus in you? What was that like? Was that freedom or bondage?

4. Paul calls Peter and the other Jews with him hypocrites. What is a hypocrite?

   What qualified Peter and others as hypocrites in this situation in Antioch? What would that look like for us? Is it easier to see our own hypocrisy or to see it in others?

5. To be justified means to be declared "just" or "righteous" before God. What is the basis by which we are justified?

6. The legalists insist that grace becomes a license to sin. Therefore they return to law to control people. Why is this belief flawed? What is the truth?

7. Is the death of Christ needed if we can merit righteousness through works? Then what do we learn by the fact that Jesus did indeed die?

Application

1. Are there any areas of your life right now where you are guilty of hypocrisy like Peter?

   Do you treat others consistent with the grace you have so freely received?

2. Are there any "legalists" in your life who are pressuring you to abide by law rather than grace?

   How are you responding to them?

3. What evidence is there in your life that Christ lives in you?

4. Is there a need for law if Christ lives in you?

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