February 8/9, 2014

Who's Your Mother?

Free Indeed: A Study of the Epistle of Galatians

Galatians 4:21-31

Pastor Bryan Clark

Well, I'm sure many of us watched the Super Bowl last Sunday. First of all, my condolences to the Bronco fans among us. *(laughter)* That was rough. Troy Aikman, one of the commentators, right at the end of the game made a comment that I found striking. Now, just before I tell you that, I understand these are world class athletes. I understand they perform at an amazingly high level, and that this was the Super Bowl, and to lose that would be disappointing. And I get all that. And I also understand there's nothing wrong with competition; there's nothing wrong with performing to the best of your ability. If I had that kind of ability, I would want to perform and develop my talent to the best of my ability. I think that's glorifying to God, so there's no problem with any of that, just so I'm not misunderstood. But the comment that I found striking was at the end of the game. Troy Aikman was talking about John Elway in the front office of the Broncos and why they brought Peyton Manning in. So they brought him in to win a Super Bowl, and he got them to the Super Bowl—but at the end, he failed. And I thought, *"That is a striking comment!"* Many would argue that Peyton Manning, as an NFL quarterback, had the best season of any quarterback in the history of the NFL. Yet the final commentary of his season was that he had failed. And I thought, "*That is the nature of a performance-based system."* No matter how good you are, you're never good enough. By that standard, every single NFL quarterback failed except one. But, at the end of the day, there are no winners. That's just the way the system works. Even if the Broncos would have won the game, it's only for one season, and then there's the next season and a new champion. And in that system, it's always, *"What have you done for me lately?"* And no matter how good you are, one day you go to bed at night and you wake up in the morning and you're yesterday's news. And maybe the best you can hope for is they ask you to come back in a big furry coat *(laughter)* and do the coin toss for somebody else's Super Bowl. That is just such an insightful commentary on the way that system works.

If you find that performance is to be the basis of your significance, the basis of your value, the basis of meaning and purpose in life, there's no way, ultimately, the system delivers. It can't. No matter how good you are, you'll never be good enough. There's always somebody else. There's always some other champion. That performance-based system works its way into the marketplace. It works its way into people's lives in the world of music and academia and how you look. I mean it works its way into our lives in every area of our lives. But the area I'm concerned about this morning is that performance-based system in the world of religion.

At the end of the day, religion is nothing more than just inserting God into a performance-based value system and, no matter how good you are, you'll never be good enough. The system simply doesn't allow for your soul to find rest. You can't be at peace. No matter how good you were today, what about tomorrow? What about yesterday? You might have a Peyton Manning season in the world of religion, which is at the top of your game; yet, at the end of the day, you fail. That's just the way the system works. Nobody will ever be good enough. It's a system that will never allow your soul to be at rest.

Every year, thousands and thousands and thousands of people are wounded by religion; they're

beat up by religion; they despair in religion. They know that this will never work; it will never be enough, and they walk away. And, sadly, they formulated a view of God that God is mean-spirited, that God is judgmental, that God is condemning—that enough will never be enough for God. And they walk away, having never really experienced what is true about the heart of God. Of course there is an alternative, but the alternative is so unimaginable; it's so unlike anything else we experience in this world, it actually seems ridiculous. As a matter of fact, it actually seems laughable. And that is the scandalous grace of God that, rather than based on our performance and our ability to be good, God offers to us a gift of His grace that we simply receive.

I would suggest to you that the most wondrous, hope-filled message that will ever be declared to mankind is the message of God's grace. And I would tell you the greatest threat to the wonder of grace will always be religious legalism. That's what we've been talking about. Paul has made an argument that he got this message of grace directly from God Himself, and then he's walked us through several arguments to say that God's way has always been the way of grace…from Genesis 3 on. There's never been a Plan B. There's never been another way. It's always been a message of grace. He's going to make that argument one more time, and then chapters 5 and 6 are: "*Okay, how do we live that way*?"

So, if you have a Bible, turn with us to Galatians, Chapter 4. We're going to pick it up in verse 21:

> **Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law?**
>
> (*NASB, Galatians 4:21)

Interestingly, he begins this argument by addressing the legalists directly, and he talks to those who desire to be *under the law*. They put themselves under the law. It's helpful to know the phrase *under the law* is not a positive statement. As a matter of fact, it's a very negative statement. It isn't the idea of walking in obedience; it's the idea that they have put themselves under bondage, under the law and its requirements. Both Romans and Galatians are clear: That is the way of slavery. It is the way of bondage. It's the way of condemnation. It's what throws us in jail. And so to choose to put yourself under that system is a very interesting choice. It is the essence of legalism that I *choose* to maintain a system that, based on my religious performance, will determine my acceptability before God. At the end of the day there are no winners. It's just bondage.

It's interesting that he says, "Those of you who do that, **do you not *listen* to the law**?" In other words, the legalists claim to be experts in the law, experts in the Scripture. They have a head full of knowledge. They can quote Bible verses. But what he's saying is, "Those of you that choose to put yourself under the law as legalists, don't you even listen to the law?"—meaning you don't really even have a clue what the law says. It's helpful to remember you may have a head *full* of information, *full* of Bible information, *full* of Bible knowledge. You may be able to quote verses to me all day long. That doesn't mean you get it! And if you don't understand the wonder of God's grace, you simply don't get the message. So he starts off by reminding them of that, and he's going to go back and do one more review of the Old Testament.

> **For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise.** (Vs. 22-23)

Now one of the challenges of this text is, it presupposes an understanding of the Old Testament story. So let me just do a quick review: God pulled Abraham out of darkness to father a people that

would be the people of God—the Jewish people—with the agreement that He would be their God, that they would be His people and, through Abraham, God would ultimately bring a son through whom the world would be blessed. So that's how the story starts. Abraham and Sarah wait for years to have this promised son and it never happens. And eventually they reach the point, on the basis of human reasoning, that it's never going to happen. "We're just too old." And so they come up with Plan B: How about if Abraham has relations with a slave girl, and she will have a son and we'll claim that as the son of promise. So the slave girl is Hagar; the son is Ishmael. But as soon as that happens, God shows up and says, "That's not the plan. I made a promise that through *you* I would bring forth a son, and through that line all of the people of the earth will be blessed." And God was very clear. "The plan with Hagar and Ishmael—that's not the plan—and you're going to have to trust Me, and you're going to have to wait."

The concept that Sarah, in her old age would have a child, was so unimaginable by human reasoning, it was so ridiculous that she laughed. And it wasn't a good laugh, and God called her on it and said, "What's the deal? Why is Sarah laughing?" And so they waited. For fifteen more years they waited! When Abraham was a hundred years old and Sarah was ninety years old, by a miracle of God she became pregnant and had a son named Isaac. The name Isaac means *laughter.* It was a reminder that fifteen years ago you laughed at this promise, but that laughter turned to joy when she experienced the fulfillment of God's promise.

That's what Paul is referring to. Abraham had two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, and they came through two wives, one a slave, one free. The son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh. If you have an NIV, I think it says *in the ordinary way.* Basically that means that's what you can accomplish in the flesh. In other words, Abraham had plan B: Have relations with a younger girl, and she can have a baby. By human standards, by flesh standards, you can pull that off. It's important to understand that as he continues to develop the argument.

Second son that came through the free woman came **through the promise**. *Through the promise* means it was through the Spirit of God. It was through a miracle. There was another agent besides human flesh that brought this to pass. So one was basically human ability, and one was a miraculous pregnancy brought on by the power of the Spirit of God.

Verse 24:

This is allegorically speaking...

Now just a comment here: The idea of allegory is basically an extended metaphor. That's the best way to understand it. The Bible is full of metaphors. Jesus said, "I am the shepherd...I am the gate...I'm the bread...I'm the water." Those are all metaphors. An allegory is just an extended metaphor, meaning the story is longer and the details of that story basically have meaning.

Now the challenge is: there are some people that interpret all of the Bible allegorically. There really wasn't an Adam and Eve. There really wasn't an Abraham. There really wasn't a Noah and the flood. These are just made up stories, and they kind of have a moral to them, and that would basically be interpreting the Bible allegorically. We would reject that. We would say these were real people. This is real history. But God teaches theology through the retelling of this history. Therefore, we're real careful about turning something into an allegory.

In this case, Paul is operating under the inspiration of the Spirit of God. He can do things with the Old Testament text that aren't necessarily free to us to do. So he tells us this story is an allegory and, led by the Spirit of God, he unpacks that. That doesn't mean that's a good practice for the rest of us. So it's just helpful to understand that.

> **This is allegorically speaking: for these *women* are two covenants, one *proceeding* from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.** (Vs. 24-25)

So the two wives, Hagar and Sarah, represent two covenants—one free, one slave. Hagar represents Mount Sinai, represents the Mosaic covenant, represents the covenant of the law. Because she was a slave, her children are slaves. That's the line that she represents. Paul reminds us that **Mount Sinai was in Arabia**; it wasn't in the land of promise. The law, the covenant of the law wasn't the fulfillment of the promise, but was en route to the land of promise. And so this is outside the land. And so this is the way of slavery and bondage, and we've talked about that in Galatians.

He also says then that that corresponds with present day first-century Jerusalem. Now what he's referring to there is Judaism. He's referring to Jewish legalism, the religion that dominated Jerusalem in his day. It would be very similar if we said today we're really frustrated with Washington, D.C. Everybody in the room understands what I'm saying there. I'm not saying we're frustrated with the buildings in Washington. I'm not saying we're frustrated with the average people that live in Washington, D.C. I'm referencing the government and frustrations there, and that's exactly the same when he says **Jerusalem**, they would understand he's talking about Judaism and Jewish legalism. And he's basically saying they are in the line of Hagar and Sinai and the law and slavery...**for she is in slavery with her children.**

When you understand what he previously said, that the line of Hagar was *according to the flesh*, you have to connect it that he's saying religion and Judaism and legalism and that way of life is appealing to the human flesh. It's what you can do without God. In other words, religion makes sense that we need to somehow perform, somehow impress God, somehow merit God's favor, somehow get God off our back, and the way to do that is to do our best to perform for God and hope somehow we merit some favor with God. That makes sense, and that's what we can do out of our flesh. But that is the way of slavery. That is the way of bondage. That's the way to throw ourselves back in jail. The alternative to that, verse 26:

> **But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother.**

Jerusalem above, meaning God's Jerusalem, meaning the message of grace, meaning what Paul has been proclaiming to them, and he identifies himself in that group. This is the way of freedom; this is the way of life; this is the line of Sarah; this is the line of Isaac; this is the line of the Messiah. That's basically what he's saying there.

The Jewish people and the Arab people would claim Abraham as a father, but in this allegory Paul is saying, "It's not just who's your father; it's who's your mother." Both Jesus and John the Baptist address this in the gospels—that it is irrelevant that you're children of Abraham. What's relevant is what you do with the Messiah! The Jewish people thought because they were Jewish, they were "in". And so he's saying, "It's not that easy." The issue is: who's your mother, and that's,

metaphorically speaking, whether you're under the law and legalism and bondage, or whether you're under grace and Sarah and Isaac and the Messiah. Verse 27

For it is written,

"REJOICE, BARREN WOMAN WHO DOES NOT BEAR;
BREAK FORTH AND SHOUT, YOU WHO ARE NOT IN LABOR;
FOR MORE ARE THE CHILDREN OF THE DESOATE
THAN OF THE ONE WHO HAS A HUSBAND."

He's quoting from Isaiah 51. Isaiah's referencing back to Genesis and to the story of Sarah being barren, and Hagar having a child. But eventually the story goes that God steps in and Sarah miraculously has a son and the barren woman becomes the line through which the Messiah would come. Now when Isaiah wrote this, he was writing to the nation of Israel that was in bondage in Babylon. It was during the captivity.

So here's the nation of Israel; they are now captured. Their land is destroyed and they have concluded that: we're done as a nation, that God made a promise, He won't fulfill the promise; there is no future…we're done. And so Isaiah quotes all the way back to what happened in Genesis and says, "It's *never* over with God. The barren woman will have a child. God will be faithful; God will keep His promise. The inheritance and the multitudes will come." It was written to them to say, "The story isn't over. God will keep His promise, just like He did to Sarah." It was partially fulfilled when they were removed from captivity, went back to the land, rebuilt their temple, rebuilt their walls, re-peopled the nation, but it wasn't ultimately fulfilled until the Messiah came. And this was the fulfillment of the promise—that this is the promised One through the line of Sarah and Isaac who would provide salvation that all the people of the world would be blessed. That's the ultimate fulfillment, and so that's what he's referring to there.

And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. (Vs. 28)

In other words, you are the fulfillment of this. All those who come in by grace, all those that embrace Jesus as Savior are actually the fulfillment of the promise that God made.

I do find it interesting that this is the first time in this text where the name **Isaac** is used. Now we've known all along he's referring to Sarah and Isaac because we know the story. But now he uses the name Isaac, which again means *laughter*. It's worth understanding that, at the end of the day, the way according to the flesh, the way of religion, the way of the law, the way of human performance, the way of religious performance—it makes sense. It seems reasonable; it seems logical. That's got to be the way. And yet, at the end of the day, there are no winners. We end up putting ourselves in prison. But the alternative is so unimaginable; it's so *other than* anything we've ever experienced. I would suggest to you it seems ridiculous that the way of grace, the way of the gospel is laughable to most of the world—to think that somehow God Himself would pay this price and would offer salvation to anyone freely as a gift is just laughable. I would suggest to you the message of grace is so foreign to anything we've ever experienced that it could have only been born in the mind of God and, because of that, it's so ridiculous! The world finds itself laughing that this could possibly be true. But Paul has identified that's what we believe. We're numbered among those whose laughter has turned to joy as we've experienced the fulfillment of that promise in our own souls.

But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him *who was born* according to the Spirit, so it is now also. (Vs. 29)

Very interesting statement. You go all the way back in this story, and Ishmael basically persecuted Isaac, and it flowed out of the fact that Hagar and Sarah had significant tension and conflict between them. And the story just got worse and worse, and it was obvious that these two women and their children were not going to be able to live under the same tent. They're just not two compatible stories. And so out of that resentment, then, Ishmael begins to persecute Isaac. Ishmael would have been about seventeen; Isaac would have been about two and a half or so. And it reached a point where Abraham finally had to say to Hagar and to Ishmael, "You can't stay here anymore. You have to go." But then he adds this interesting statement...**so it is now also.**

If you're under the impression that if you embrace a rigorous theology of grace, if you believe God's message of grace and choose to live this way, that the religious world will love you and embrace you and celebrate you, you have misunderstood something. The greatest threat to religion is the message of grace, and the text is clear that your persecution as a person of grace will not come from the secular world. It will come from the religious world and often from those who consider themselves to be under the umbrella of Christianity. Even today, as more and more Christians are martyred around the world for their faith, most are not martyred by secularists; they are martyred by religious groups.

The challenge for people who are highly religious is the message of grace that says all that religion, all that effort, a lifetime of trying to impress God, ultimately does not accomplish anything before God, and it's only in brokenness and humility before God that you receive a message of grace that changes everything.

Think of it this way: The dark room is filled with highly religious people, and they live with their shame; they live with their guilt; they live with their despair; they live with their fear. They live with all of this that comes with religion, and yet they listen down the hall and there's music and there's laughter and there's joy, and there's celebration—and they resent that. *"How dare you live that way?"* —because they don't live that way, and they're constantly yelling down the hall to turn off the music and stop the dancing! Nobody resents the message of grace more than highly moralistic, highly religious people. And one of the challenges is that highly moralistic, highly religious people basically bow their neck and they're just simply unwilling to listen to the possibility that their religion does not merit them favor with God because the idea that, after years and years and years and years of this, to accept the fact that this doesn't really merit favor with God, is just unacceptable. And so they lock in and, "Nobody's gonna change my mind"—which was the state of the Judaizers in the first century. Verse 30

But what does the Scripture say?

"CAST OUT THE BONDWOMAN AND HER SON,
FOR THE SON OF THE BONDWOMAN SHALL NOT BE AN HEIR WITH
THE SON OF THE FREE WOMAN."

This goes back to the Genesis story, and eventually God said to Abraham, "Hagar and Ishmael, they've got to go! These two families cannot live together under the same tent." In the allegory it's saying that the system of grace and the system of law are not compatible. It's one or the other. You cannot mix them together. If you're going to be a person of grace, if you're going to embrace a full

theology of the wonder of the grace of God, you have to understand it can't mix together with a performance-based religious legalism.

Now this is helpful to understand because there's a lot of pressure in our world today that all religion should just come together and be one. And even under the umbrella of Christianity, we should all just come together and be one. I'd be the first one to cheerlead that all of us who believe in a message of grace, that are the children of Sarah and Isaac and ultimately embrace the Messiah, we should come together as one, and we should remove the labels and come together as the people of God. I fully support that and have worked toward that. But I also understand there are those that are children of Hagar. There are those that still embrace that somehow, on the basis of our religion, on the basis of our religious works, on the basis of our performance, on the basis of morality I gain favor with God. Those systems are not compatible, and they will never be compatible.

One of the things we have to understand as a local church is the more aggressive we become to maintain a healthy, rigorous, full theology of grace, the more uncomfortable the environment becomes for the legalists among us. And often they will feel the need to find some other church where they feel like their "system fits". That's just part of the reality, and that's what the text is saying.

Now there's a very interesting twist in this text. The Judaizers and the Jews, by and large down through history, were very familiar with this text out of Genesis, only in their minds they understood it this way: that the Jewish people were the children of Sarah, were the children of Isaac, were the children of promise destined for the inheritance, and the Gentiles were the children of Hagar, the children of Ishmael, the children of slavery. And they understood this text to be saying the Jews, as the children of Abraham, must cast out the Gentiles, who were children of Hagar. So that became the basis by which they separated themselves from the Gentiles in order to guard who they were as Jews.

But what Paul is saying—you might refer to it as *The Great Reversal*—is but actually that's not true at all. Those who come to faith in Jesus, those who embrace the message of grace actually become the children of Sarah. They become the children of Isaac. They become the children of promise through the Messiah. These Gentiles that have embraced the Messiah are actually the children of God, the sons of Abraham, the recipients of the inheritance, and these Jewish legalists who continue to embrace the law are actually the children of Hagar, the children of Ishmael, the children of slavery, and *they're* the ones to be cast out.

Now can you imagine if all your life you'd been taught that you're *in* and they're *out* and, in this stunning moment Paul says, "You've got it all wrong. Actually these Gentiles, because of their faith in Christ and their desperate need, they're *in*, and you highly moralistic, highly religious legalistic Jews, by the way, *you're out.*" You might call that *The Great Reversal.*

And then he closes with verse 31:

> **So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman** (we, all who believe—Jews and Gentiles)**, but of the free woman.**

Chapters 5 and 6 of Galatians are, *"Okay, if this is true, then let's live like it."* And we'll talk about that in the weeks to come.

Just a couple of closing comments: First of all, I would be the first one to tell you that, on the basis of human reasoning, religion makes the most sense. I get that. Everything in our world is performance-based. Everything is about the high achievers. Everything is about those that measure up and those that don't. Everything in life is that way. So the idea that religion, the idea that a relationship-God would be like that, that makes perfect sense to me. I understand that. I also understand from this message of grace that God would do the work Himself, that God would offer salvation no matter who you are, no matter what you've done, no matter where you've been, no matter what's been done to you, that simply on the basis of your faith to believe Jesus did the work for you and, on the basis of His grace, you are a recipient of the inheritance. To believe that it could be that simple, that easy, seems unimaginable. As a matter of fact, in some ways it seems just ridiculous. I understand it even seems laughable. I would suggest the message of grace is so *other than* anything we've ever known, it could have only been conceived in the mind of God. All I can say is that, even though on the basis of human reasoning, that makes sense, read the Book. Read the Book, because the Book says otherwise.

We started back in Galatians, chapter 1, and said we are going to accept this book as the authoritative, inspired word of God for our discussion, and that's the argument Paul has made to the Jewish legalists who consider themselves to have a head full of knowledge and be experts in the Book. And what he is saying to them is, "Hey, fellas, go back and read the Book because, from cover to cover, it has always been about God's grace."

One of the big challenges with highly religious, highly moral people is they have convinced themselves that they are good enough. I would suggest to you the most difficult people, after thirty some years of ministry, to reach with the gospel of grace, are highly religious, highly moral, very good people. They celebrate Christmas. They celebrate Easter. But, at the end of the day, they see no real need for a Savior.

There is a reminder that you can have a head full of knowledge; you can have lots of information; you can have lots of religion; you can quote me lots of verses, but that doesn't mean you get it. And sometimes what happens is: people become so entrenched in a lifetime of religion, they're just simply no longer open to the idea that that doesn't merit favor with God, and they close their heart and mind to the message of grace.

Interestingly enough, there are two ways to avoid Jesus. One is by being very, very bad. The other is by being very, very good. And I would suggest to you, in the Midwest, more people will miss Jesus because in their minds they've been very, very good. But there is coming a day when people will experience the great reversal. And those people who have convinced themselves that, on the basis of their religion, on the basis of their good works, on the basis of their morality, on the basis of their performance, they've convinced themselves, "If anybody gets in, I'll get in." And they've convinced themselves they're good enough. But they're going to stand before God and God is going to cast them out because they're children of Hagar. And there's going to be those that the world has said, "You don't fit; you don't measure up; you're the misfits; you're the sinners; you're the losers," those that the world has rejected, will stand before God, and God will say, "Because you understood your desperate need for a Savior, and you received My gift by faith, you are My children. Welcome in."

There will be a great reversal one day. My prayer would be not one single person here this morning would miss it, and that we would understand our desperate need, in brokenness and humility, for a Savior.

Our Father, we're thankful for Your grace. Apart from Your grace there just simply was no hope. Lord, I'm sure there are many, maybe even many in this room, that are very good, very moral, very religious people. But perhaps they've never really understood the message of grace. Lord, my prayer would be every single one of us would understand that good is never good enough and that, from cover to cover, You have told us apart from Jesus and His work on the cross, there is no hope. Lord, may we embrace that message. May we believe that we might be children of Sarah, that we might be children of Isaac, that we might be children of Abraham, that we might be children of freedom. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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February 8/9, 2014

Study Questions
Who's Your Mother?

Free Indeed: A Study in the Epistle of Galatians
Galatians 4:21-31

Opening Discussion

1. Review some of the main points from 1:1-4:20. If you missed the video review from last weekend you can access that on the website.

2. What category of people do you believe are the hardest to reach with the message of the Gospel of grace? Why?

Bible Study

1. Read Genesis 16:1-6; 21:1-13 as the background for this study in Galatians. Then read Galatians 4:21-31.

2. What does Paul say to those who are determined to hang on to their legalism in 4:21? Is it possible to have a lot of Bible knowledge yet totally miss the core message?

3. Outline Paul's allegory in this text. What defines both mothers and what do both represent?

4. How is this a picture of the flesh and Spirit or performance and promise? How do you see this playing out in our culture today? Does one way make more sense to the average person than the other way? Why is this?

5. What does Paul state in 4:29? What do you suppose he meant by that statement? What should we expect if we celebrate grace and freedom? Who can we expect to attack us?

6. What is the "great reversal" of 4:30? Who did the Jewish legalists think was "cast out" and who was cast out in reality? How might this "great reversal" happen today?

Application

1. Is it possible to have lots of Bible knowledge and still not understand the core message? How then do we go about making sure we are not like that?

2. What should we expect from the legalists if we celebrate and live in the freedom of grace? How might this manifest itself in our lives? How do we avoid giving in to the legalists?

3. What are some practical things we can do to help highly religious, good moral people realize their need for a Savior? How do we get them "lost" so they see the need to be "saved?"

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