March 15/16, 2014

The Great Divide

Free Indeed: A Study of the Epistle of Galatians
Galatians 6:11-18
Pastor Bryan Clark

So what is legalism? I have intentionally avoided a neat, tidy definition throughout the series, just hoping we would wrestle with that question. But since this is our last week in Galatians—next week is a review—it's probably time for a neat, tidy definition. Some people, anytime they face something they disagree with or they just don't like, they just slap the label *legalism* on it as if that makes it go away, but that's really not helpful at all. This is what I would consider to be a biblical definition: legalism is the belief—that's really important; it's not ultimately what you do or don't do—it's a belief system. It is a belief that on the basis of my performance—the dos, the don'ts, the religious activity—I can earn *more* with God...more love, more acceptance, more justification, more righteousness—more. Legalism is the belief that on the basis of my performance I can gain *more* with God. Just because someone has standards and convictions and disciplines, just because some church or school or organization has standards and convictions and disciplines doesn't make that person or that organization legalistic. I would say I have many standards and convictions and disciplines that define my life. I think of them as railroad tracks that set me free to ultimately live out the passion of my heart. The passion of my heart is to celebrate this relationship with Jesus and to live my life for Him. And because I'm serious about that, I seek to create an environment where I'm most likely to succeed at that and that requires certain convictions, certain standards, certain disciplines. It only becomes legalism when I begin to think by keeping those, it earns me *more* of God; it merits me somehow more favor, more righteousness, more justification, more forgiveness.

There also might be people who you might describe as kind of a free spirit, and they're the last person you would ever think of as legalistic. But in the belief system of that free spirit, if that person starts thinking that: *My way is the better way. This is the better way to be a Christian; this is what it really means to serve Jesus; this is the right way to do church; this is the right way to view the environment; this is the right way to view the poor,* and in that belief system, thinking somehow because they have it right, they're gaining more of God's favor, that free spirit is legalistic up to his or her eyebrows. Some people tend to draw a distinction thinking legalism is only relevant to the gray issues of life—those issues where the Bible isn't so clear and maybe we have levels of disagreement—but doesn't apply to the clear commandments of Scripture. But that's simply not correct. Without question, the Bible is full of commands and it's black and white. Either you're obedient or you're disobedient. If you choose to be disobedient there are natural consequences to that. But, if in obeying the clear commands of Scripture, I think that makes me *more* with God—more acceptable, more righteous, more justified—then that's legalism. It flows then into what we refer to as the gray issues—areas where the Bible isn't so clear and we may have levels of disagreement that come out of our own backgrounds and our own stories. I may have certain convictions about things that you don't have. There's no legalism in that. It's only legalistic when I start thinking: *This is the right way and it gains more of God's favor*, and usually that is demonstrated by my desire to impose my convictions on you if you want to really be a serious Christian.

I believe every generation gets really good at seeing the legalism in every other generation. We all do it. What happens though is we really struggle to see the legalism in our own generation. It's always helpful to start with the assumption, "I am a legalist," and begin to examine my own life and

try and figure out where are those pockets of legalism and seek to deal with that. Over the years I've found that the overwhelming majority of legalists would say, "I'm not a legalist." This is part of the problem. There's always some reason why in their case it's okay; it's justified; it's not legalism. And this often keeps them locked in this system of rules and legalism that ultimately leads to despair and destruction as Galatians says.

I think it's entirely possible for someone, some church, some group of people, some individual, to say all the right words—salvation by grace through faith alone—and to be very adamant about that but still be up to their eyebrows in legalism. Oftentimes it's not just the words that are spoken. It's more of a feeling; it's more of a culture, an environment, where even though the words of grace are spoken, everybody in that environment knows there's more to the story. There's an expectation; there are certain things you do and don't do, and requirements and activity that are necessary if you *really* love Jesus. It's more of a cultural feel.

Here's something that I've found helpful over the years. Typically, people that are defined by legalism have an air of spiritual arrogance. They're right; everybody else is wrong. They're constantly judging everybody else. They're constantly pointing out the problems in everybody else. There's a feeling of superiority that everybody else is to some degree inferior because legalism, by its very nature, makes us arrogant. If we really believe in grace, it's a necessary outcome to be characterized by humility, by brokenness, by a graciousness that defines our lives. It just simply isn't possible to really understand and believe grace and turn around and be defined by spiritual arrogance. It's just not possible. Arrogant people just don't get it. So, how big of a deal is it?

I would suggest to you that the number one concern of the New Testament writers, for us as believers, is legalism. It shows up in virtually every New Testament book. And in this case, Paul has dedicated an entire letter to this discussion. It is a force so powerful that roughly twenty years after the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, well within the lifetime of the apostles that heard it directly out of the mouth of Jesus himself, Paul is concerned that the message of grace is being compromised by legalism. It is a force so powerful that roughly twenty years after the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, both Peter and Barnabas were drawn in to the legalism in Galatia.

This morning, one last time, we look into the book of Galatians and look at Paul's conclusion. I mentioned the very first week that Galatians was unique because of the introduction. Typically in the letters there's kind of a template of introduction, "Hi, how are you? This is Paul, thinking about you." You know, that kind of thing. Galatians is his only letter where he skips all that and he goes right to the topic, leaving us with a sense of urgency. In the same way the conclusion is very unique. Almost always someone writing in a first century culture would have had a secretary, a scribe, somebody doing this for them, and it's believed in most cases that Paul utilized such a person. But in the conclusion he actually says, "At this point in the letter I'm actually taking the pen, and I'm writing the conclusion myself in my own handwriting," as a way of saying, "I want you to know, this is a really big deal." Verse 11:

> **See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.** (*NASB, Galatians 6:11)

Some would say the **large letters** is related to the fact that Paul had some eye problems. I think it's really hard to figure out really what that even means. There's a passing reference to it in Galatians, but almost all scholars conclude that isn't the point here. The point is he is saying this is a way of emphasis and there is debate about whether he's saying large letters or thick letters—in other words, bold type. You take an ancient writing instrument and just push harder and it becomes much bolder

and thicker. Either way the conclusion is that Paul is saying, "This is such a big deal, I'm writing the conclusion in bold type, in my own hand, to make this point." And a lot of scholars feel like if you understand the conclusion of Galatians, you understand Galatians. It's the summary of the whole argument. Verse 12:

> **Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.**

Verse 12 reminds us of the motive of the legalist. **Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh.** A reminder again, he's defining *flesh* as almost a synonym for *law* or *legalism*. Those that choose that approach, what is the motive? The motive is to put on a *good show*. It's all about *me* and how I look and what kind of a show I can put on to convince you that I am spiritual, that I am superior, that I have arrived, that I am *somebody* as a Christian. So that's what he tells us. It's all about how I appear. The emphasis is on *me*. It's about how I look. In order **to make a good showing in the flesh, they try to compel you to be circumcised.** One of the ways they make a good showing is by compelling you to comply. When you externally comply to the rules and regulations and activities, that makes me look good.

Now in the first century it was an issue of circumcision. I doubt that's the issue that we're bumping up against today. But any external standard, whatever the rules and regulations and activities are, if the legalist can compel you to comply, that makes the legalist look good and that's the point—**simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.** That word **simply** is really important there. In other words, what he's saying is there is no more noble motive than simply the fear of judgment from other legalists. In other words, at the end of the day, the motive is not really about *you* and your Christian walk and the desire to see *you* experience joy with Jesus; it's about the show. It's about *me*. It's about people noticing *me* and evaluating *me* and I always have the fear of the other legalists assessing *me* and judging *me* and my desire to be superior or to be judged rightly in their eyes. Now this is a force that is so powerful that it actually caused both the Apostle Peter and Barnabas to slip back into legalism. The text told us in Galatians, it was out of fear of what the other legalists would think.

I would suggest to you, our churches are filled with people who, out of a fear of what the legalists would think, they conform their behaviors to the external standards required. Our churches are filled with people that could not open up their Bible and explain to you why they live the way they live. They could not even begin to explain to you why these certain rules and convictions apply to them. It's as simple as understanding: That's the rule and out of fear of how others might view me if I don't obey the rule, then I simply comply. The point of offense, according to the text, is **the cross of Christ**. The reason the cross of Christ is so offensive to the legalist is because the cross, at the end of the day says: there's no activity, there's no effort, there's no religious sacrifice that can make me *more* in the eyes of God. Therefore, it's *all* based on the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

Imagine a religious person who, for a lifetime, has followed the rules, has made the sacrifices, has conformed his or her behavior, convinced that all of this somehow impresses God, and finally reaching a point where somebody says, "Do you know that that doesn't impress God at all? A lifetime of effort is nothing in terms of earning or meriting righteousness with God. It's only based on the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus." To highly moralistic, religious people, that message is offensive and that becomes the stumbling block. As a matter of fact, I would suggest that verse 12 has the two primary reasons why legalists continue to be legalists. No matter how many verses you

show them, no matter how many Scriptures you unpack for them, they dig in their heels; they bow their neck; they're just not going to change.

It's based on two things. One is, "What would the other legalists think? I simply cannot make that change. What would my family think? What would my friends think? What would the other legalists think? How might I be judged?" And based on that, I just can't change. And number two would be the offense of the cross. "You mean to tell me after a lifetime of effort, after a lifetime of sacrifice, after a lifetime of discipline, after a lifetime of doing so much to impress God, that none of it merits me favor with God? I just refuse to believe that." Those are the two things that cause legalistic people to remain legalistic for a lifetime. Verse 13:

> **For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh.**

The system of legalism doesn't work. It doesn't even work for the legalist. They aren't able to **keep the Law,** but they require you to keep the Law, and the text tells us: in order that they might look good—they might **boast in your flesh**. In other words, the more you comply, the better the legalist looks. Now the way the legalist gets around the inability to keep the Law is the legalist just simply cherry-picks what the issues of the Law are. We saw this in Galatians—that they cherry-pick a handful of things. In this case, one of them is circumcision but there's a whole long list of requirements under the Law that are ignored. And it raises the logical question: what is the basis by which you cherry-pick a handful of things and ignore the rest? At the end of the day, you aren't even coming close to measuring up. Legalists get very good at creating their own manmade standard—that these are the requirements; this is the list of dos and don'ts and, typically, they create a list that shows them favorably. Most of the time the things on the list aren't things that tempt them at all.

I talked last fall about the fact that I had concluded, "I'm awesome," and I concluded that on the basis of an awesome standard that I wrote. (laughter) I wrote the requirements of awesomeness and then I measured myself against my own standard and concluded I really *am* awesome. That's exactly what the legalist does. He or she formulates a manmade standard upon which they measure themselves and conclude, "I'm spiritually awesome". The problem is that manmade standard isn't God's standard and the fact is they aren't even coming close to measuring up. So what the text is telling us is this creates people who put on a very good show in public but at home, in private, it's a very different picture. The legalist comes to church and shows himself or herself to be Super-Christian. "Hey, check me out! I'm Awesome-Christian!" And they pull it off. "I'm awesome. My marriage is awesome. My family's awesome. I'm Awesome-Christian." But, it doesn't look the same at home. It doesn't look the same at work. Suddenly, Awesome-Christian gives way to Real-Christian because the system of the flesh cannot really change your heart; it just doesn't hold up. You can pretend in public, but who you are in private *is* who you are and the flesh simply doesn't have the capacity to truly change who you are.

There's probably quite a few of you in this room that, through your lifetime, you have been deeply wounded by someone who appeared to be Super-Christian in public, but was something very different from that in private and it's a been a struggle throughout your lifetime to try to make your way back to a meaningful relationship with Jesus. Verse 14:

> **But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.**

The legalist boasts in the compliance of other believers, but Paul says the only real boast for a person of grace is in the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. He's affirming what I said before, that grace, truly understood, cannot lead to spiritual arrogance; it just cannot. The message by its very nature is a message of brokenness; it's a message of humility; it's a recognition that the only point of boasting is in what Jesus has done for me. It's interesting, that in a book dealing with legalism, that the reference to Jesus or Christ occurs forty-three times. One out of every three verses throughout the book of Galatians is a reference to Jesus or Christ. At the end of the day, it's only on the basis of what Jesus has done *for me* that I have anything. So he says on the basis of that, the world has died to him and he has died to the world, referencing the world's value system— a performance-based value system. On the basis of my performance I merit favor with God. On the basis of my religious activity, I give myself significance and value and righteousness. In order to experience new life in Christ, there has to come a point in time where you finally say, "I just can't do it. This self-righteous, performance-based value system doesn't work. I cannot make myself acceptable to God. Therefore I choose to die to that belief and choose, rather, to believe it's only on the basis on the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus and His offering of new life on the basis of grace that changes me, that saves me, that makes me righteous in the presence of God." Therefore, he goes on to say,

> **For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.** (Vs. 15)

We saw this in chapter five; it's a powerful statement! By circumcision he's talking about religious moralism—Jewish moralism in the first century culture—and he's contrasting that with Greek pagan idolatry uncircumcision and, in the end, he's saying the religious moralists think that they're so dramatically different from the pagan idolaters but, at the end of the day, there is no difference. Neither of them merits anything with God. The only real option is **new creation** in Christ. The only real option is a supernatural rebirth on the basis of the Spirit of God. That's the only thing that merits us favor, righteousness, justification, forgiveness with God. Verse 16:

> **And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy *be* upon them, and upon the Israel of God.** [And upon the true people of God]

The word **rule** there is a Greek word that's a reference to a carpenter's rule. It's a standard of measure and when he's saying it's only the people that measure themselves on the basis of *new creation in Christ* that experience the peace and the mercy or the peace and the grace that our souls long for. Verse 17:

> **From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus.**

In a first century Greek pagan religion it wasn't unusual that you would actually be branded—physically branded—to be identified with a certain pagan deity. It's likely that Paul is picking up that language and saying that he has been branded in the name of Jesus for the cause of grace. The religious legalists, the Judaizers, whom I think he is referring to when he talks about his thorn in the flesh, literally made his life miserable. Time after time after time they had him beaten within inches of his life and you can almost imagine Paul dropping his robe and exposing his back and saying, "This is what it cost me to bring to you the message of grace." And what he's saying is, "The least you can do as the church of Jesus Christ is to fight for it...is to fight for it!" Verse 18:

> **The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen.**

So there you have it—*The Great Divide*. Every single one of us in this room will either sow to the flesh and reap corruption or sow to the Spirit and reap eternal life. There is no middle ground. Either your life is going to be defined by the Spirit or by the flesh. Either it will be a life of grace or it will be a life of legalism and law. There is no middle ground. There is no meshing the two systems together. When you add one work of the flesh to grace, it ceases to be grace. The legalist will convince you that you belong in the *Dark Room*. On your worst days, when you blow it and you make a mess of things, the legalist shows up and the legalist says, "You go to your room and you think about what you just did and you stay in that *Dark Room* until the pain of the punishment is greater than the pleasure of the sin"...and somehow we will beat you into submission! It's a *Dark Room* filled with shame; it's filled with guilt; it's filled with despair. It is a *Dark Room* full of excuses, full of rationalizations, full of finger pointing but you stay in the *Dark Room* because the legalist says, "That's what you deserve because you are a Loser-Christian." And in your mind that makes sense. "I blew it; I made a mess of things; I am a Loser-Christian and this is what I deserve." And so you stay in the *Dark Room* week after week, month after month, year after year. You begin to define yourself as Loser-Christian which then dramatically affects how you live your life as a Christian. And you just spiral down deeper and deeper into the despair until your Christian life is nothing more than a religious duty or obligation that you try to crank out every day and you cling to this ticket to heaven.

But there is another way—that, on the basis of the grace of God, you have been invited on your worst days when you blow it and you make a mess of things, to run past the *Dark Room* and to run into the *Light Room* that is filled with the *Light of Jesus*. And in that room there is joy and in that room there's happiness and in that room there is peace and in that room there is celebration and in that room there is *light*. In that room there is confession of sin. In that room there is true repentance. In that room my soul comes back to life and I remember again what matters. And this is what my soul has been longing for and this is the way I want to live my life. In the *Light Room* you experience the life that your soul longs for, even on your worst days. And about the time when you think it just could not get any better, the music begins to play and Jesus comes up to you on your worst day and invites you to dance with Him to the music of *Amazing Grace.*

If some of you were to be honest today you would have to say, "It's been a really long time since Jesus and I danced together. At one time we were like two lovers and I had this joy in my Christian life, but something happened and I stopped hearing the music and I stopped dancing. And now my Christian life is nothing more than fulfilling a duty or an obligation day after day." What happened? What happened?

I would suggest what happened is the legalist said, "Listen, Loser-Christian, go to your room," and you believed that. What is the way back? First of all, you have to believe. You have to have the courage to believe as I described the *Light Room*. The world around us would say, "That's ridiculous. That is scandalous." And they're right; it is. Grace *is* scandalous but you have to decide: Does God tell the truth or doesn't He? And you have to have the courage to believe. And then you have to have the courage to *fight* for it. I cannot emphasize that enough. Your default mode is the flesh. You have to be willing every day to fight for grace and to believe this scandalous grace is true and to change your belief system in terms of the basis of what makes you acceptable for God and to find your life in the *Light Room*. I would suggest to you we've spent entirely too much time in the *Dark Room*. I think it's time to dance.

Our Father, we're thankful for this amazing grace. God, my prayer would be for all of us that we would have the courage to believe this, to believe that You tell the truth, to believe that grace is our invitation into the Light Room even on our worst days, and that our sin no longer condemns us—that we have been set free, God, that we would boast in You and You alone. God, give us the courage to believe and to fight to be people of grace. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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Study Questions

Free Indeed: A Study in the Epistle of Galatians

The Great Divide

Galatians 6:11-18

Opening Discussion

1. There are times in our lives when we have to decide to go one way or another—we cannot continue to ride the fence. Discuss examples of those kinds of decisions in life.

2. Think of a specific example of a time when you had to make such a decision. What were things like before you made your decision? How did you arrive at your decision? How did your life change after the decision?

3. Define legalism? What is it and what is it not?

Bible Study

1. Read Galatians 6:11-18. How important does this seem to Paul? Why?

2. What motivates the legalist, according to Paul in 6:12-13?
   How does this compare with what happened to Peter (Cephas) in 2:11-13?
   What does "make a good showing in the flesh" mean?

3. How does the operating system of the legalist eventually lead to a double life according to 6:13?

4. What does Paul mean when he says the "world has been crucified to me and I to the world?"

5. Review the meaning of Paul's statement that "neither is circumcision anything or uncircumcision." (see 5:6). What is the great divide between belief systems today? Is it "Christianity" as one world religion compared to other world religions or is it between those who believe they merit God's favor by works versus those who believe they receive God's favor by grace?

6. How is a "new creation" different from religious moralism or pagan idolatry? (2:20; 4:21-23)

7. Jesus (Christ) is mentioned 43 times in Galatians (1/3 of all the verses make some reference to Christ). As true believers what is our one and only boast?

Application

1. What are the three most significant truths you have learned or been reminded of from your study of the book of Galatians? How do these truths effect your life on a daily basis?

2. What will be necessary for you to experience the freedom Christ died to give you? How do you prevent yourself from drifting into legalism? What will it mean for you to "fight" for grace every day?

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