March 22/23, 2014

Galatians In Review

Free Indeed: A Study of the Epistle of Galatians

Galatians 1:1-6:18

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"The True Gospel" - Galatians 1:11-24

(Bryan via video)

So what do you think was the single greatest concern for you as a Christian today—the single greatest concern of the New Testament writers? What do you think was one of Paul's greatest concerns for the integrity of the gospel less than twenty years after the ascension of Jesus? And when God Himself became flesh and actually walked on this earth, what was the primary source of conflict that would become so intense that He would become executed?

I believe the answer to every single one of those questions is *legalism*. I believe Paul's greatest concern, less than twenty years after the ascension of Jesus, was regarding the integrity of the message of the gospel of grace. To me, this is staggering! It hasn't even been twenty years since Jesus ascended, and the disciples who actually heard the message of the gospel of grace directly out of the mouth of Jesus Himself—in less than twenty years there's a high level of concern that the message is being compromised. Do you think there's a possibility, then, that two thousand years later there could be a problem?

For all of eternity, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit dwelt in relationship with one another—one God, three Persons—the Father delighting in the Son, the Son delighting in the Spirit, the Spirit delighting in the Father—loving, celebrating, delighting in one another...what theologians have often referred to as *The Dance of God.* It's just beautiful. That is the essence of eternal life. The very essence of salvation is God, on the basis of His grace, inviting you into the dance. I love the imagery—like a small child without any inhibitions—just delighting in and dancing in the presence of God, just enjoying the relationship.

There are some of you here this morning, if you were to be honest, you would say, "I have never danced with God. I am up to my eyebrows in religion. I have been hurt by religion; I've been wounded by religion; I've been confused by religion. I have been beat up by legalism. I want this *God thing*, but it's so confusing to me. And I'll tell you this: I have never danced with God."

There are many others of you here this morning who would say, "I'm a Christian. I've trusted Christ as my Savior." But if you were to be honest with me this morning, you would say, "Bryan, I have to tell you this: It's been a very long time since God and I danced. You see, the volume of legalism becomes so loud, I no longer hear the music of grace, and I just stopped dancing. And all that is left is I just slug it out, day after day after day." My prayer for you would be over the next couple of months we could identify and remove the legalism that holds you in bondage, and that you would find yourself once again dancing with delight in the presence of God.

Every world religion has, at the heart, the same operating system, and that operating system is: there's something, somehow, you can do to merit some favor with the god or gods. Christianity is distinct in saying, *"Actually God did it all for me."* There is absolutely no question that religion glorifies sinful man, and there's no question that grace glorifies a holy God. Some of you have been told that without a particular church, without a particular denomination, without a particular movement, you cannot be saved. The moment you hear that, red flashing lights ought to go on

because suddenly we're defining some terms and we're saying, "Yes, it is salvation by grace through faith…plus our denomination…plus our church…plus these religious rituals." It's plus *something*. That's why you need that church or denomination ultimately to be saved. What the Bible would clearly teach is salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ and His finished work on the cross *alone*. You don't need the Bereans. You don't need the Baptists. You don't need the Adventists. You don't need the Catholics. You don't need any church or any denomination. Salvation is *by* Jesus, and Jesus *alone*.

"Liberty or Bondage" - Galatians 2:1-10

Who decides which sins are acceptable to struggle with and which sins are not? Who decides what the rules are in terms of who's in and who's out? And which sins are okay, and which sins are unacceptable in determining somebody's salvation? I'd be the first one to tell you, "Yes, when you are radically changed by the power of Jesus, Jesus begins to change you from the inside-out." I get that. And I believe, over time, there will clearly be life change. But who determines what sins are acceptable, what sins are unacceptable, when that happens, how quickly it happens? Who makes those rules in determining whether or not somebody is really saved or not?

The scandalous nature of grace is grace *alone*. And when you understand that, it is very powerful. Think of it this way: Let's imagine I'm a Christian, radically changed by the power of Jesus, and you are following me, magically following me through my day. And it happens to be a terrible day. I give in to temptation. I sin. I offend God. I make a mess of things. It's just a disastrous day, and you've watched this disaster as I have so poorly represented Christ today.

Now imagine this metaphorically: You go home with me and you follow me, expecting me to go into the *Dark Room*. And in the dark room I will put my face in my hands and I will deal with my shame and my guilt and my disgust and my disappointment and my failure. And I will live with the consequences of my choices, which were disastrous that day. And you're absolutely sure that's what will happen and that's what *should* happen.

But I go through the dark room and quickly run out. I run down the hall and I actually run into the *Light Room*, and there is Jesus. And I run and I jump onto the lap of Jesus, and He hugs me and He loves me, and He laughs with me, and He accepts me, and He celebrates me. And there's joy and there's celebration and there's music. And He dances over me, and I dance with Him. And it's a celebration! And you, as an observer, are appalled at this. You're thinking Jesus *has* to know how this loser behaved today. For him to come home at the end of a day like that and act like that is completely unacceptable. As a matter of fact, it's just scandalous!

You're right...you're right! And if you get that, you're starting to understand grace. What sets me free is understanding that my standing before God is based on the righteousness of Christ. And in those moments when I blow it the worst are the moments when I need the most to be in the light. I run to the light! I jump onto the lap of Jesus, and I remember that He loves me and He accepts me, and He forgives me. And what happens in that moment is that my soul comes back to life. I remember who I am in Christ. I remember what's true. I remember what life comes from. I remember what I want—this is what my soul is hungry for—and I have been renewed in my passion for righteousness. There is no way tomorrow I'm going down the same path because I've been recalibrated, and I remember again: this is what life is about.

There is no way, on your worst days, that you go to the light room unless you understand it's salvation by grace, through faith *alone*. It's not performance-driven, and it's there I find my life.

That's what makes grace so powerful. That's what makes grace so amazing. And I would suggest to you that is worth fighting for.

"Why Did Jesus Die?" - Galatians 2:11-21

The new life I have now is not *my* life. It's not *my* power. It's not *my* righteousness. It's the life of Christ in me. I'm a new creation in Christ. I now have the very identity of Christ in me. On my best days and on my worst days I am clothed in the righteousness of Christ. It's His life in me. This is where I would make the case: It just simply isn't possible to truly be a born-again Christian and sin as a way of life. It's just not possible. The old boy's dead, and the life that I have is actually the life of Christ. How does Christ go on sinning with no conviction? The problem is the very end of the scale. You *have been* radically changed. You *do* have the power of Jesus in you. You *do* want to walk uprightly. You *do* want to walk pleasing to Him. But you struggle and you fail and you sin and you blow it. And you feel the shame of that. You feel the guilt of that and the condemnation of that. And you're thinking, "*I'm never gonna get this. I'm never gonna measure up, and I'm a lousy Christian, and I'm a lousy witness."* And you get in the dark room, and you can't get out of the dark room because you think you got to beat yourself up and somehow prove to God how sorry you are for your sin. And now you've rebuilt what you once died to, and you're thinking you're defined by your works.

What the text says is the life that I now live, I live how? By faith. What am I believing? I'm believing that He loved me and He gave Himself up for me. I'm believing that He has provided for me, on the basis of his grace, an invitation into the light room. Verse 21:

> **I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness *comes* through the Law,** (in other words, through works)**, then Christ died needlessly." (***NASB, Galatians 2:21)

That's a very powerful statement. If I can go into the dark room and, on the basis of my shame and my guilt and my beating myself up, somehow merit favor with God, there was no reason for Jesus to die. Jesus even asked this question in the Garden of Gethsemane when He said, "Father, is there any other way?" And the fact that He went to the cross is God's answer that there is no other way. He did not die needlessly. He died because He had to die in order to atone for your sin, to offer you salvation freely as a gift.

"The Foolishness of Legalism" - Galatians 3:1-14

(The charts referred to below are available in the full transcript of "The Foolishness of Legalism")

I think for much of my life I believed this is the tension. There's a tension between legalism and license. As long as you believe that's the tension, you will never embrace a full, rigorous, healthy theology of grace. Grace is the invitation to the life of the Spirit. It's the basis by which I experience salvation. It's the basis by which I experience life in the Spirit. Grace is that invitation into God's life. When you understand it that way, there's no way you can talk too much about grace. There's no way to be too filled with the Spirit. The problem is at the other end.

Flesh manifests itself in two ways: It manifests itself in legalism, and it manifests itself in license. The text just told us that an outflow of the flesh is legalism. It's not more spiritual; it's fleshly. A lot of people then buy into this discipleship theory. Now this is "red"—naughty—stop!
You have this religion of works which cannot save you, so you reach a point where you come to the cross. Salvation by grace through faith: New life in Christ. But your theology is such that it's just a *ticket to heaven*. And now that I have a ticket to heaven, I'm obligated. I'm obligated to try harder; I'm obligated to go to church; I'm obligated to somehow make myself more righteous. This is the

very definition of legalism. When you buy into that, this is the realty that, rather than achieving more righteousness, you're just stuck. You've gone back to something that didn't work. The truth is (green slide) you try works. Works don't work, and so you come to a place where you trust Jesus as Savior. *Salvation by grace through faith alone.* At that moment, Romans and Galatians tell us you are justified. You are clothed in the righteousness of Christ and, because the righteousness of Christ will never diminish, it will never diminish in you. So then what is the essence of the Christian life? What is the essence of discipleship? (Next slide) Basically I think it looks like that. We are trying to live consistent with what is now true.

"The Purpose of the Law" - Galatians 3:15-29

Imagine what it would be like if I could learn to view myself through the lens of grace. And rather than weekly assessing my performance and beating myself up and struggling with that, I was reminded that this isn't performance—it's promise! What if we would focus our attention on Christ rather than our performance? If you go back and count them, seven times in those few verses it names the name of Christ. It's Christ…Christ…Christ…Christ. It's not you. It's not your performance. It is *Christ* who has made the difference from the inside out. If we'd learn to understand that and think that way, it changes everything. And imagine if, not only do I view myself that way, but I begin to view my fellow Christians that way. Instead of being prone to pick and fix and correct and change and judge and criticize, we actually viewed one another through the lens of grace and to see one another as God sees us, and look beyond performance to promise and realize that on your best days and on your worst days there's something to celebrate because, according to who you are in Christ, you have been radically changed. What if in our accountability groups, what if in our small groups, what if in our relationships with Christian friends, rather than always assessing how many ways we've let God down this week—all the ways we've failed, all the ways we struggled, all the ways that we're a loser—that we completely change that orientation and we actually see each other through the lens of grace and remind one another what's true in Christ. And it's not performance; it's promise. And the last time I checked the Book, even though you had a stinky week, because you were in Christ, I just want to remind you of this: You are awesome! Imagine if we believed this so much that we actually lived like it? Just imagine!

"Sons or Slaves" - Galatians 4:1-20

When we started Galatians, we used the metaphor of this freedom in Christ is like this beautiful dance between two lovers in the light to the music of *Amazing Grace.* But I said there are probably some of you, maybe many of you, if you were to be honest, you would say, "It's been a long time since I danced with Jesus to the music of *Amazing Grace.* Something over time has changed, and the music I dance to most days anymore is the music of *ordinary grace.*"

What happened...what happened? How is it that we've gone from being sons to going back to being slaves? At one time, I was amazed by grace! I was amazed that God would save a wretch like me. I had no hope, and then suddenly, because of Christ, I have hope. I have a future. I have a new day. My sins have been forgiven. I have new life. This is new and it's exciting, and it's filled with hope. And we're two young lovers dancing to the music of *Amazing Grace*! I didn't need people telling me that I have to do this and I have to do that, and I need *this* religious thing, and I need *this* religious thing and all these external management systems. It was in my heart. That's what I wanted. It was the outflow of my passion.

But over time something happens. Grace goes from being amazing to being ordinary, and we stop dancing as two young lovers. And as the passion cools off, the rules heat up. It always works that way. Now I need all kinds of external religious management systems to compensate for what's not

in my heart anymore. I am more passionately in love with Jesus today than I've ever been in my life. I am passionate about Jesus. I'm more amazed by grace today than I've ever been. I just can't understand why He would do this, why He would save me, why He would love me, why He would celebrate me, why He would want to dance with me, why He would want to spend forever with me, why He would give up His own Son to make it possible, why He would put Father, Son and Holy Spirit on the assignment for us to be intimate. I don't understand that, but it is remarkable, and it fires a passion in my heart. This is what I want. This is where life is found. I *want* to be obedient. I *want* to walk in righteousness. I *want* to walk with integrity. I *want* to do the right things. I *want* to invest myself in the things that matter. I don't need a bunch of external religion trying to force that. I don't need it to compensate. It's in my heart. It's what I want; it's what I long for. It's my passion!

But here's the deal. I can guarantee you this morning that if you and Jesus are not celebrating a deeply passionate, intimate relationship together this morning, it's *not* Jesus that cooled it off. It's *not* Jesus that turned down the music. It's *not* Jesus that ended the relationship—which leaves only one other option. It was *you*. For whatever reason, it was you. You decided you didn't want it anymore. You decided it didn't matter anymore. You decided there were things more important now. Whatever the reason, you're the one that walked away. You're the one that cooled the relationship. And I guarantee you; Jesus waits as a lover today for you to come home and to rekindle the relationship. He gave up His own life to make it possible, and He calls you back home to experience this intimate relationship with Him. He stands by calling out to you as a lover would call out and invites you to, *"Please come home*! *Please come home, and can't we dance again to the music of Amazing, Amazing Grace?"*

"Who's Your Mother?" - Galatians 4:21-31

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.

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.

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. 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, and 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." 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.

"Standing Firm" - Galatians 5:1-12

Keep standing firm. It's actually a military term. It's interesting how many military terms are used about living a life of grace. It basically means to stand firm; it means to hold your ground. The terminology I've used several times in Galatians is, "You have to fight for it." It's worth noting that the phrase *Keep Standing Firm* is an imperative, meaning it's a command. In other words, as people of grace, we're actually commanded to fight for it, which would mean that legalism is disobedience. It was for freedom that Christ set us free.

So what does he mean by *freedom*? I think many, many Christians would understand this as freedom from sin, and that sounds very good. But this is the problem: Someone like me says, "The truth will set you free," and you're excited, and you walk out that door thinking, "*I've been set free*," but tomorrow you crash and burn. Tomorrow you sin. Tomorrow you offend God. Tomorrow you make a mess of things, and there's a reality to this that says, "You know, I'm really not free. It's not working for me." This is the theology that gets you stuck in the dark room because now it's about shame. Now it's about guilt. Now it's about despair. Now it's about disappointment, and you conclude in your mind, *"For whatever reason, this doesn't work for me, and I'm a loser Christian and that's all I'll ever be."* And as long as you're thinking that, there's no way out of that dark room, and the core problem is you have misunderstood the statement.

The bondage is what? The *yoke of slavery* is the slavery that comes from the Law. It throws you in prison. Paul has told us this several times in the book of Galatians. Therefore, if that's true, freedom would be freedom from condemnation, freedom from the curse of the Law. On your best days and *especially* on your worst days, when you mess up, when you sin, when you offend God and you're grieved in your heart, and you feel like you've blown it again, you have to understand in this moment, you have to fight for it in this moment. "I thank God I'm not condemned anymore! I'm not under the curse of the Law anymore. God doesn't hold this sin against me anymore! But actually, because of what Jesus has done for me, I'm free! It was for freedom that Christ set you free!

"The Spirit at War with the Flesh" - Galatians 5:13-25

> **But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.** (*NASB, Galatians 5:16)

Walk by the Spirit is a daily, moment-by-moment, hour-by-hour choice to submit, to surrender in brokenness and humility to the power of the Spirit in me. The alternative is to cater to my flesh, and my flesh wants to be God. When he references the *desire of the flesh*, that's what he's saying. "My flesh wants to be God. My flesh wants to be in charge. My flesh wants to believe somehow, someway, I can make myself more acceptable to God." The tension is not between license and legalism. The tension is between the Spirit and the flesh. And the flesh is my desire to be my own god, and it will manifest itself in one of two ways: either in legalism or in license—and often times people jump back and forth between the two. People that are up to their eyebrows in legalism; then they abandon that and they go full-speed into license, and then at some point they abandon that to go back to legalism. And on one hand, it looks like these huge swings; I would say it's not a swing at all. It's just going back and forth—two different ways to manifest the flesh. The problem is

they're stuck at the flesh end of the scale, and the only way out of that is the life of the Spirit, which requires a full, wondrous, amazing theology of grace. He goes on then to describe this tension:

> **For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.** (Vs.17)

What he is saying is the default mode of every person in the room is the flesh. There is simply no one in this room that is so spiritual that every morning you wake up and say no to the flesh and live in the Spirit without consciously thinking about it. Walking in the Spirit is as practical as everyday. It's a choice of my will, in brokenness and humility; it is submission and surrender to say, "God, today I'm not in charge." At some point you have to decide what you believe to be true. Does amazing grace turn into license or does amazing grace open up the door to the life of the Spirit in order that we might live the life that God has called us to?

"We Reap What We Sow" - Galatians 5:25-6:10

> **Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.** (Galatians 6:7)

This is a very familiar biblical metaphor. It's actually used a lot. What you sow will determine what you reap. Now that seems so painfully obvious, but the text says *do not be deceived; God is not mocked.* In other words, you can't beat the system.

For me personally—at this season of my life; I'm 55 years old—and one of the things that I find to be the most meaningful to me, that of all the people on the face of the planet, the person I'm most excited about is the person I come home to every day. There is something about that that is very special, and it's very meaningful, and I do not take that for granted. Over the years people have often said, "Well, you're lucky." I used to just let that go. I don't let it go anymore. It is not luck. Some relationships don't just happen to work that way. It's years and years and years of choices, of doing the hard work. It goes back to choices that Patti and I made when we were 14, when we were 16, when we were 20, when we were 30, when we were 40, when we were 50. It's choices I made yesterday. It's choices I will make today. It's about sowing and reaping, and choosing to believe that God tells the truth. "I'm going to do this God's way," and you reap the fruit of that. Verse 8:

> **For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.** (Galatians 6:8)

So when he's talking about sowing to the flesh, what he's talking about is legalism. What he's talking about is: "As long as I sow legalism, as long as that becomes my mode of operation, I can expect to reap a harvest of corruption." The alternative is to sow to the Spirit; and if you sow to the Spirit, what do you reap? The text says you reap eternal life. I think this is summarizing the whole of Galatians. It's bringing it down to the conclusion and saying if you keep embracing your legalism, that's going to define your harvest. But if you embrace the message of grace and this message of God's Spirit, then you will reap a harvest of life. Eternal life is not just a duration of life. It's not just a ticket to heaven. It's a quality of life.

"The Great Divide" - Galatians 6:11-18

So what is legalism? This I think is a simple biblical definition. Legalism is the belief—it's really important at the end of the day; it's not about "activity" or "doing" or "don't-ing". It's a belief system. Legalism is the belief that, on the basis of my performance, I can gain more with God.

So how important is this? I would suggest to you it is the number one concern of the New Testament writers for us as Christians. It shows up in virtually every New Testament letter and, in this case, Paul has dedicated an entire letter to the discussion of legalism. It is interesting that in a book dedicated to the discussion of legalism that the references to Jesus or Christ come up forty-three times. One out of every three verses in the book of Galatians is a reference to Jesus or Christ. It is the reminder that, at the end of the day, it's Jesus, and Jesus *alone* that has made us acceptable to God.

So there you have it—*The Great Divide*. Every single person in this room will either sow to the flesh and reap the corruption of that, or you will sow to the Spirit and reap a harvest of life. Either you will be defined by the Spirit or by the flesh, by grace or by legalism in the Law. There is no middle ground. The legalist will seek to convince you that you belong in the dark room, that on your worst days when you sin and you fail miserably, and you're feeling the pain and the agony of that, the legalist comes along and says to you, "You go to your room and you think about what you just did! And you stay there until the pain of the punishment is greater than the pleasure of the sin. We have to beat that sin out of you!"

But there is an alternative. The alternative is on the basis of the scandalous grace of God, that on your worst day when you blow it and you totally mess up, grace is the invitation to run past the dark room and run to the light room. And when you get into the light room, there is joy and there is happiness. And I realize that in the light that, even though I blew it today and I sinned, that I no longer bear the condemnation of my sin. I have been set free from that. And I realize in the light room that this is the life I want. There is true confession of sin. There is true repentance. My soul begins to come alive again with the life of Jesus. This is what I want. This is what matters to me. This is what I'm searching for. This is the way I want to live my life, and I'm recalibrated again to walk in the light. And just about the time when I'm convinced it couldn't really get any better than this, I begin to hear the music. And much to my surprise, on my worst day Jesus steps up to me and He says, "Let's dance to the music of *Amazing Grace*."

The world would find what I just described to be ridiculous. They would say, "That is just scandalous!" I agree; it is! Grace is scandalous! But that doesn't mean it isn't true. I would say to you this morning, "We have spent far too long in the dark room. It is time to dance."

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