

# Never Going Back!

An optimistic, conversational,  
thought-provoking commentary on  
Paul's letter to the Galatians

First Edition (1.2)

C Clifton Jones

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# Preface

## *An imperfect commentary*

This commentary leaves a lot to be desired. Of this, I am painfully aware. But at the same time, I hope it will be encouraging to some people, especially those who are under the spiritual bondage of laws, rules, regulations, and control, which is widespread in our day.

I've spent the last fifty years carefully reading many systematic theologies, commentaries, and well-written books. So, I am very aware of how far I have fallen short of the high bar that's been set before me. My approach in this commentary is quite different from most of those I've read, admired, and benefited from over the years. The only complaint I have about most good commentaries is that they are difficult to get through. So, I've tried to write something anyone can read and relate to.

## *A conversational commentary*

I've tried to make this commentary conversational. That is, I want readers to feel they are having a *conversation* about the subject at hand. For me, this means saying things using common, informal language – even using folksy and slang terms at times – just as most people do when talking with their friends. This makes my commentary a bit wordy, but my goal is for the reader to relax,

enjoy the ride, and settle in for a journey through one of Paul's letters which he writes so passionately.

However, I've also tried to include some background information and explain words used in the original language – Greek. But this is a *comment-ary*, so I have commented as I felt it might be helpful and appropriate. It is left to the reader to look into things more carefully if so desired.

### ***A thought-provoking commentary***

I have also tried to be thought-provoking. This is more of my goal than having readers automatically accept what I write. I always encourage people to take Paul's advice and, "Examine everything carefully." You are always better off doing that than blindly trusting anyone. Always take everything you hear and read directly to God for his take on what is true. Your ability to do this (as granted to everyone by God) is greater than most teachers and writers want you to believe. God will never fail you. Trust him.

### ***A verse-by-verse commentary***

At best, I am a rank amateur when it comes to the Greek language. I took my first year of Greek from Darell Bock at Dallas Theological Seminary in 1982. I also completed a video course by Bill Mounce (as a refresher) about 30 years later. Then, as an attempt to get my second year of Greek under my belt, I worked through Daniel Wallace's excellent and thorough book, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*. And so, I depend on those who have dedicated their life to be experts in this ancient language, and so I learn from them.

However, I do know Greek well enough to understand what they are saying when they weigh in on the New Testament

writings. Translation and interpretation of any language is both an art and a science. One big thing I learned from Wallace is that all translators interpret, to some degree, when they translate. From Mounce I learned that “common sense is your best friend” when trying to translate any text.

And so, though I depend on those who know Greek better than I do, still I check and double check them against each other, use common sense, and do not just assume any translation is perfect. The Old Testament book of Proverbs says there is “safety in a multitude of counselors” and that certainly applies here.

Some translations are very literal renderings of the original New Testament text as an attempt to be as accurate as possible. Others are very loose and flexible, desiring to express the original author’s intent in English. There are disadvantages to each method, and there is no perfect way to translate anything from one language to another. So, I try to combine all these principles into the text I use in my commentaries. I want it both readable and accurate and sometimes these two goals are at odds with each other. Therefore, the translation I use is a combination of many. However, I am convinced that if readers use common sense, read with the full context in mind, and seek God for understanding, pretty much any popular translation will be sufficient.

In my commentaries, every time a new portion of the New Testament text is introduced, I use a **bold** font so it will stand out. When you see this, a new portion of the New Testament text is introduced, followed by the comments of this commentary.

### *An optimistic commentary*

Finally, and perhaps this is the most important feature of my commentary, I try to present God, life, and eternity in the most optimistic perspective possible. I do this simply because this is

how Paul and all the other New Testament writers present God. This is not to say there is never anything harsh or severe spoken about God. There is! But as Paul once wrote, “Behold the goodness and severity of God.” He presents a balance of how to view God. Essentially, he is saying that God is *severe in his goodness*, but that he is also *good in his severity*. This is the key. The goodness of God, despite any severity that he allows and brings, always represents who God is and how he operates. He always acts in goodness and wants the very best for all humanity that he so loves and created in his own image!

# Introduction

Freedom is a precious thing. Some people never experience it, physically or spiritually. Others gain it and then give it up as if it had no value. Why do they do this? Some, perhaps, never realize what they possess. Maybe some inherit their freedom and never experience how awful bondage can be.

But it turns out that some people just can't handle freedom. True freedom is a double-edged sword; it comes with the requirement of making decisions and living with the consequences, both good and bad. People in bondage only know how to slavishly do what they're told. Any decisions made are small and have little impact.

In this letter of Paul's to the people living in the ancient region of Galatia (now modern-day Turkey), he not only offers spiritual freedom but marvels at how anyone could ever experience such freedom and then so easily give it up. Freedom! Real freedom, spiritual freedom – which is the ultimate freedom. To be free, physically, is one thing and is indeed very precious. But when a person becomes spiritually free it is something no one can ever take away ... it can only be forsaken.

Paul's cry to the people of Galatia is that he's never going back into bondage, void of the Spirit. But he also wants them to never go back and instead enjoy peace, joy, security, and the kind of freedom that can only be found in the person of Jesus, who is the one and only Son of God!

# 1. The Real Thing

## (Galatians 1.1-10)

### *Letters and Gospels (1.1a)*

**This letter is from Paul, an apostle.** This is how Paul starts a lot of his letters. He says *who* he is, and he says *what* he is.

However, some books in the New Testament are anonymous. Did you know all four gospels are anonymous? The gospel texts themselves never identify who the writers are. The names ascribed to them, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, come from tradition. It could be that these four individuals actually wrote these books, or they may have been written with their approval or using their name. But either way, each gospel has a different perspective.

Jewish Christians liked Matthew's gospel because he addressed the issues relevant to them. He tailored his gospel for Jews as his targeted audience and so they favored it. Keep in mind that Christianity wasn't totally cohesive in the beginning! It isn't today, either. There were people who followed Paul, or other leaders, exclusively. Paul mentioned this in his first letter to the Corinthians and encouraged everyone to live in unity.

The Gospel of Luke is a Paul-oriented version of the Good News (the gospel) and appeals more to Gentiles (non-Jews), tailoring his version for them. Matthew and Luke both seemed to use Mark's earlier and shorter version of the gospel as the basis for what they wrote, each adding events and teachings they felt

were important. John's version of the gospel came much later and presented a whole different approach to who Jesus was. He had a lot of unique events and teachings that the other three gospels did not have.

But in this letter of Paul's, he says it's a letter from him and that he's an apostle. In another of his letters, written to the Romans, he said it was from him *and* Timothy. But this letter to the Galatians seems to be just from Paul. However, at the end of this letter, someone else writes, "I'm writing this down for Paul." Apparently, he was a scribe and Paul was dictating his letter to him. This scribe may have touched Paul's letter up and he may have improved the grammar. Who knows? He may have even helped Paul edit the final version. Perhaps he suggested, "Hey, do you want to say this another way?" He also might have played some part in the content of what was written. And that's okay. That's what people do when they write. They often run it by somebody else. I sure do!

I don't think anything Paul wrote was a dictation from God, where Paul went into a trance and his pen started moving automatically. Nor did Paul put his hand on the scribe's shoulder and his pen started automatically moving, resulting in what was written. It seems to be very much a human product, and to what degree God *inspired* it is reasonably debated. What Paul authored was, at least, his own human writing including personal opinions and perspectives.

Don't get me wrong, these letters and gospel narratives in the New Testament are among the best – if not *the* best – writings ever produced in human history! This is why I teach from the New Testament verse-by-verse. It's certainly all about Jesus, his life and sacrifice, who God is, and our relationship with him.



## ***Some kind of divine appointment (1.1b)***

Then Paul writes, **No human authority appointed me as an apostle. Instead, I was appointed by Jesus Christ himself and by God the Father, who raised Jesus from the dead.** I think there's a little bit of defensiveness here by Paul and maybe rightly so. Paul persecuted Christians, dragging them out of houses and killing them. Then, all of a sudden, he turned his life around and wanted to join the Christian faith. Christians were rightly suspicious of Paul. They, at first, probably thought it was a trick. This is partly why it took so long for Paul to get up to speed as a new *Christian*. It was three years before he did anything with them. He will talk about this later in this letter. Paul just hung out, waited on God, and claimed to have received revelation from Jesus. It is hard to say if this was a verbal and direct revelation, or if he went into some kind of spiritual state. Perhaps it was just a strong conviction from God as many of us feel today about our beliefs.

But here, in this letter, he claimed that he was “not appointed by any human authority.” With Paul, there is always a bit of tension between him – having come later as an apostle – and the original disciples who were with Jesus from the beginning. In his letter to the Corinthians, he refers to these original disciples as *super-apostles*. Now, some people believe Paul was referring to *false* apostles and was referring to them sarcastically as *super* apostles. This could be. But knowing human nature (and Paul was very human by his own self-appraisal), tensions often exist between good and honorable people in ministry. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, “All have sinned and fall short of the perfection that is only found in God!” So, it's okay for Paul to be imperfect and human. It makes what he wrote all the more realistic, practical, and something we can all identify with.

Paul claimed that his authority “came from Jesus Christ himself and from God the Father who raised Jesus from the

dead.” So, he's laying out his authority right here at the beginning of his letter, whether anyone believes it or not and whether it's true or false, this is what he's putting forth as his credentials. He's getting his *resume* out there first.

## ***Making it personal and practical (1.2)***

Paul then writes, **I am joined by all the brothers and sisters in sending this letter to the churches in Galatia.** Galatia is a region; it's not a city. Most of Paul's letters were written to people in particular cities like Philippi, Ephesus, Colossae, and Rome. He also wrote to some individuals. But Galatia was a regional area, and today it is known as modern-day Turkey. That's where a lot of the early New Testament churches were located – in that region of Galatia.

Paul continues, **May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.** It is interesting that he uses the word *may* here. Did he mean “Maybe God will do it, and maybe he won't?” I don't think he meant it that way, even though he used the word *may*. Based on all that Paul says about God throughout the New Testament, I doubt he was hedging. Of course, God will give us grace and peace! He gives it to everyone, all the time. We just don't always receive and apprehend what God gives us.

So, Paul must mean something like “allow it to happen, may it happen, may you receive it, may you experience it, may you understand it.” Or, maybe Paul meant, “May God give grace and peace at this point in time,” knowing that God works in people's lives at different times and in different ways. God always gives and provides it; we just don't always take and receive it!

In verse four, Paul writes, **Jesus gave his life for our sins, just as it was planned by God our Father. This plan was to rescue us from this evil world in which we live.** Paul identifies people as those who need to be rescued. This was God’s whole plan – for Jesus to be *the* rescuer. We're all in trouble. We've fallen into sin. We've messed up. We need a savior. We need to be rescued. This was God’s plan – to rescue us from this evil world. Some people have taken this to mean that Jesus came *only* to rescue those who believe in him. But it’s clear throughout the New Testament that God came to rescue everyone and that he will succeed! Jesus said he came “to seek and save those who are lost.” John, in his gospel, wrote, “Jesus was sent into the world to save it, not condemn it.” His purpose, mission, intention, and goal were clear. Paul is addressing a particular group of people and saying that Jesus came to rescue *us* (Paul and those he is writing to). And, certainly, all his readers are included. Elsewhere in his letters, Paul makes it clear that the whole world, everyone, all humanity is God’s target. Chapter five of Paul’s letter to the Romans is a good example.

Paul ends this short introduction of his letter in this way, **So all glory belongs to God forever and ever! Amen.** Sounds like the end of a prayer. Sometimes Paul ends his letters with *amen*, which means. “I agree.” Perhaps Paul is just saying he hopes his readers will agree with all he just wrote in this introductory part of his letter.

### ***I stand amazed! (1.6)***

At this point, Paul’s letter gets very interesting! He writes, **I am amazed that you’ve turned away so quickly from God who called you to himself through the loving mercy of Christ.** Paul is asking them, “You're turning from God so soon?”

I mean, it was just last month that you had turned *to* God and now you're turning *away* from him? He's the one who called you to himself through the loving mercy of Christ, so how can you possibly do this? What is going on with you folks?"

Paul continues, **You're now following a different Good News message, you're following one that only pretends to be the Good News. But it's not. You're being fooled by people who are distorting the truth about who Jesus is.** Now, it is interesting that Paul does not take the time here to define exactly what the Good News is. He doesn't say what *distorting the truth* means. He doesn't give any details. He's just laying out the problem before them.

### ***Let God's curse fall (1.8)***

He goes on and says, **Let God's curse...** Owoo, that sounds harsh. **Let God's curse fall on anyone, including me or even an angel from heaven, if they proclaim a different Good News message than the one I've already preached to you.** Paul is being really hard on these folks! It's *God's* curse he's talking about. It's not just a curse from some witch or a few swear words thrown around. These are harsh words, no matter how you cut it. However, there is *always* a positive aspect in everything God does and everything that happens in life. So, I look for how this idea of God's *curse* can, ultimately, be a good thing. Here is what I discovered about this word, *cursed*. It doesn't mean, "I'm going to put a spell on you," nor does it mean, "I'm going to swear at you." Curse, in the Greek language (in which Paul was writing his letter), means "to dedicate, or set something apart, in a negative way." It's something that is being *called out*, identifying something (or someone) as being wrong, incorrect, or bad. It doesn't mean *to send someone to hell*. People will sometimes read this into the word

*curse*, but it's not what this word means. However, people are free to conclude that Paul means this, even though he never says so. But it's pure speculation on their part, and I cannot find that Paul, anywhere in his many writings, ever talks about anyone going to hell. Translators of the Bible often read into these kinds of harsh words (condemnation, judgment, punishment, perish, curse, etc.) some kind of retaliation by God with no corrective purpose on his part. They will automatically tag God with something horrific like sending people to hell. But that's what they've been taught that these words mean, although none of these harsh words mean *going to hell* in the Greek language. I was taught this, too, in my upbringing. But I found out, as I investigated these words carefully, that they don't mean either *annihilation* or *never-ending punishment*.

For example, John 3:16 says (in most translations), "God loved his world and gave his son so that whoever believes will not *perish* but have eternal life." Many people have been taught that this means, "If you believe ... you won't go to hell, and instead, you'll go to heaven." But the problem is that the word *perish* just means *destroy* in the Greek language. Perish seems to be intentionally chosen by translators in place of *destroy* because it sounds more like *going to hell*. What people are taught to *read into* the New Testament often becomes what they see there! We are wise to discipline ourselves to say, "Wait a minute, does it really mean *hell*? Does it have to mean that? Am I required to stick with that interpretation and translation?" The freedom I've gained in the last decade, as I looked into the meanings of words in the New Testament, was amazing. I realized I was making words say things that people were telling me to make them say. So, that's what *curse* means, and it doesn't mean "go to hell."

In verse nine he goes on and repeats himself, **Let me say it again, if anyone preaches a different good news message from the one you already welcomed in the past, let that**

**person be cursed by God.** In his first warning, Paul said that even if an angel from heaven preaches a gospel other than the original one that he gave them, that person is to be cursed by God. But in his repeated warning he says they should reject any gospel message different from what they *already* welcomed. So, he's saying, "What I told you, and what you received, is the one and only Good News message about Jesus. We already settled this in the past. You received the Good News message, it had certain characteristics, and it gave you a new freedom. And now you're abandoning it. Why? Why would you? Who has fooled you?" He's going to ask, later in this letter, "Who has *bewitched* you?"

Those are harsh words from Paul, but they have a purpose. He didn't just pat them on the head and say, "Hey, you're not believing the right thing." Instead, he says, "Hey folks, this isn't good. Those who are teaching this false Good News message are out of line in a big way. They're in trouble – not trouble that results in going to hell, but they're in trouble with God because God doesn't want falsehood going out. So, for now, God *curse*s them (declares them unfit), but he'll deal with them in a good way, ultimately, just as he does for everyone."

Notice that in repeating his warning, Paul covers two aspects of the Good News message – the *sending* aspect (what he proclaimed to them) and the *receiving* aspect (what they welcomed and accepted). It's a complete message, sent out by him (and others) to be received by all who hear it. Both parts are necessary for the Good News message to be successful. Also, Keep in mind that "God's curse" doesn't mean God's putting the curse on someone or that He's going send anyone to hell for distorting the Good News into something it's not. *Curse*, in Greek, is kind of like the word *holy* which means to "set something apart for some special and good purpose." The difference is that *curse* has a negative connotation. It means to set something apart and mark it as bad or unacceptable. It does not mean to send someone to

hell to be eternally punished, which is sometimes a meaning ascribed to this word by religious people.

It can mean, however, “to set apart for judgment” or correction. God will not stand by idly and allow false and distorted versions of his Good News message about Jesus to go out without a warning. So, Paul starts his letter using the most severe terms – that anyone who distorts the wonderful message of God’s love and grace, as embodied in Jesus, is to be declared wrong, unfit, and rightly to be judged as such (where judgment means simply “to make an accurate assessment”).

One big theme in all of Paul’s letters is his distinction between law and grace, and that *salvation* means being saved by God’s grace through faith. Grace is the basis for salvation from our sin and failings, and faith is the way we receive salvation from God and experience it. But always keep in mind that our faith never *earns* us anything with God. God doesn’t see our faith and say, “Oh good, now you believe, so I won’t have to do something horrible to you forever in eternity.” No. Instead, he’s already done something good *for* us in Jesus on the cross – and for all humanity. In Jesus, God “took away the sin of the world” and “reconciled the world to himself in Christ.” It’s a *finished* work, according to the final words of Jesus on the cross.

So now, what needs to change isn’t God or his attitude toward us. That’s always been good, and it always has been. He loves his world and always desires everyone to be saved, restored, redeemed, and reconciled! What needs to change is *us* – our minds, our hearts, and our lives. In Paul’s letter to the Romans (chapter twelve), he said it is the *renewing of our minds* that is needed.

## ***Not trying to win approval (1.10)***

In verse ten he writes, **Obviously, I'm not trying to win approval from people, only from God!** He says this because his harsh words probably didn't settle well with some of his readers. **If my goal was to please people, I wouldn't be Christ's servant.** He's telling them, "If I wanted to be popular, I'd never use harsh words and I'd just tickle people's ears!" So, Paul makes a good point – that sometimes we need to talk about the harshness of reality.

I often get accused of only saying nice things about God, that I claim everything is good, that it's all so squeaky clean, and that I don't get real about judgment and condemnation. But these harsh words (judgment, condemnation, curse, etc.) don't mean what many people force on them. When we sin, God rolls up his sleeves and makes an *accurate assessment* of people. This is what the word judgment means, "to make an accurate assessment." It doesn't mean "to send someone to hell." Judgment is sometimes harsh, but it is, ultimately, a good thing. Good for you, God! Thank you for making an accurate assessment of us, getting involved in our lives, and saying, "I'm going to *condemn* something – not you, but something *in* you. Your sin! I'm going to condemn the *old nature* in you, the flesh, because that's got to go! I'm doing you a favor. I'm doing radical cancer surgery and getting rid of the crap in your mind, heart, and life."

When God punishes, it is *corrective* punishment – it's not pure retaliation. It's the same thing we do with our kids who we so very much love. So, in that sense, God's judgment, condemnation, and punishment are all good things because they are always *corrective* in nature. They're positive things, but they're painful and they feel harsh to us. I try to sympathize with people when they go through difficulties because they can be very horrific experiences. But I tell them that it always has a good purpose because God is involved.



Paul even said, “I don't view anybody in the *flesh* (human nature) anymore. I view them in Christ.” He focused on that, and so should we. Otherwise, we're focusing on negative things which become distracting and get in the way. That doesn't mean we never acknowledge that we're sinners who are frail, failed, and flawed. We all are. I don't think we have to tell anybody else they're a sinner, either. They already know it. There may be a few arrogant people out there that need to be told, but most people already know this about themselves. That's not the problem. The problem is that they don't know the solution and how good it is. They would leave their sin in a heartbeat if they ever, once, tasted the solution. They'd say, “What the heck am I doing in life? I want more of this peace, joy, and freedom!?”

This is what Paul's communicating here. He's telling these folks in Galatia that they've already tasted the solution, and now they're going back to a false gospel, the law, and trying to earn their salvation. For what reason? Well, going back seems to be our human nature, old habits, and old ways of thinking. These are all deeply rooted in us. It's easy to fall back into old habits and forget the beautiful things we've discovered. This is the whole purpose of Paul's letter – to remind them of all the good things they had, plus the contrast between the gospel of grace, (complete, total, God does it all) and everything else.

Everything else is some form of law, requirements, and *you-gottas*. This is very popular in many churches, today. They will say, “You don't need to work for your salvation, *but*... you've got to believe.” If we *have* to do anything to be saved from sin – even if it is just believing – it becomes a requirement, and we are back under some kind of law! I keep telling people, “If you've got to believe in order to get saved from God doing something terrible to you ... then that's a work you're doing to earn salvation with God.” There's no other way to describe it because it is still something you *must* do. By this kind of thinking, when you don't believe, you're in big trouble with God. Then when you believe,

it gets you out of being forever tormented. If that's true then we're earning something by believing!

That's very different than seeing faith as something we do in *response* to God, something that has no merit. Faith is the correct way to respond. If you want to wait to believe, (and many do), go ahead. But God's not going to do something horrible to you because you don't believe. He loves you, he will wait, and he'll keep working in your life. He is faithful and never gives up on anyone! You can disguise working for your salvation with, "I'm just believing." But as soon as you add anything to God's grace as a requirement (working, believing, standing on your head in the corner, or anything else) it becomes a *work* that you must do to earn something with God. Just stick with, and depend on, what God has done for you by grace. Remember, grace is *unmerited* favor by God on our behalf.

## 2. Called By God (Galatians 1.11-24)

### *Mere human reasoning (1.11)*

Dear brothers and sisters, please understand that the Good News message is not based on mere human reasoning. *Mere* human reasoning! He's not saying, "The Good News is unreasonable!" He's not saying, "Don't look for it to make sense on a human level." He doesn't say, "Go launch off into mysticism where right is wrong, up is down, and where you can't really understand anything and need to go into a trance." He's saying that the gospel message of the Good News is not based on *mere* human reasoning. But it's not an unreasonable gospel. You'll find Paul constantly appealing to people's reasoning abilities in his writings. However, the gospel is not based on reason *alone*. There's something far beyond just human reasoning in the Good News. There is always a spiritual reality present that we can never fully understand. So, do not reject this Good News in the name of being reasonable and rational, nor because it is something beyond our understanding!

### *How I received my message (1.12)*

He then writes in verse twelve, **I did not receive my message from any human, nor did anyone teach it to me.** So

where did he get it? He didn't go up and check with the original apostles of Jesus. He didn't go study under the philosophers of that day. Paul's claim is that he received his message by direct revelation from Jesus Christ. Now this is quite a statement because Paul wasn't one of the original twelve disciples back when Jesus walked the earth. Jesus had already died, raised, and ascended to heaven long before Paul converted to Christianity. So how did Paul get revelation directly from Jesus? Well, he either got it directly from him in the spiritual realm, or Jesus came and appeared to him in his resurrected body. I don't know which one it is. I don't think Paul ever clearly says – though he claims in his second letter to the Corinthians that he “ascended into the third heaven and saw things he could not speak of.” However, in his letters, he is left with only writing things he *can* speak of. And this is all we have to go on.

For sure, he's claiming Jesus as his source. But basing his claim on some supernatural encounter is a heavy lift in most people's minds. I'm not very impressed by this because anybody can *claim* something to be true. Joseph Smith, Ellen G White, Mary Baker Eddy, and a host of others all *claimed* to receive revelation from Jesus or God. However, what *does* convince me about Paul is the results of his life and the value of his teaching. It's not good enough for me to conclude, “OK, you got it from God, somehow, and I'll just go along with it!” However, when I read Paul's letters, they make good sense and resonate with me. His writings (and others in the New Testament), seem amazingly special – as if they are somehow the very *words of life*. I know of no other set of writings that have this characteristic. This is all very personal and subjective on my part and so I don't impose it on others as some kind of absolute truth.

In reading the New Testament, as good and helpful as it is, I found I had to, at some point, close the “book” (New Testament) and say to God, “Okay, that's Paul's claim. Now, you tell me, is this true? Are these words and ideas that I can trust?” Well, I

found the answer to be *yes*, and I have also found these writings to be essentially helpful in living life successfully, bringing me peace and freedom. However, I can only claim this for myself. Each person must make their own decision about this and I respect it.

### ***You know what I was like (1.13)***

Paul goes on, **You know what I was like when I followed the Jewish religion** – and notice he calls it *religion* – **how I violently persecuted the people of God. I did my best to destroy them. I was far ahead of all other Jews in my zeal for the traditions passed down to us.** I think Paul was kind of the “John Wayne” of the Jews, the *man's man*, or maybe the *Jew's Jew*. But then, look who God picked as the missionary to the Gentile (non-Jewish) world! He chose Paul, the most zealous, brilliant, motivated Pharisee Jew that there was! By doing this, God was effectively saying, “I only need one such person.” God could have enlisted an army of a dozen such *Pauls*, but he didn't. God was also saying, “I only need one, but I don't even need Him! Let me run this experiment. Let me take the most violent oppressor of Christianity and reveal myself to him. He will have to live with everything he has done against me all his life, and that will motivate him to serve me in a very special way.” The contrast between law and grace, Saul and Paul (his old and new names), is so extreme it becomes one of the greatest transformations in history.

### ***But even before I was born (1.15)***

In verse fifteen Paul continues, **But even before I was born, God chose me and called me by His amazing grace.** Before

Paul was born, his work was already destined for him. But he didn't have a clue. I'm sure he thought when he was killing Christians, that he was really serving God and that God was very pleased with him. That's the zeal of religion at work. It blinds people! I doubt he was thinking, "I don't know if I should be killing all these Christians." He really believed he was *cleaning house* of all the false teachers. What a turnaround! What a shock for him to go through such dramatic change and discover how wrong he was. How humbling! I think that's why it took fourteen years before he began his ministry work. He had to process everything he had learned compared to all he held true in the past.

Paul knew God called him by an act of grace (unmerited favor). It was something he hadn't earned in any way, shape, or form, nor did he deserve it. Paul wasn't even seeking it! He wasn't thinking, "Should I be a Christian or a Jew?" He was full-bore, all the way for persecuting the Christians and being a Jew's Jew.

Keep in mind that Christianity started out as a Jewish endeavor within the context of Judaism. The first followers of Christ were following a rabbi named Jesus who died on a cross, instead of following the Jewish system of the Law of Moses. They went from following a *system* to following a *person*.

So, Paul began to take this message about Jesus and the cross to the non-Jews all over the known world. And, man oh man, did he do it! It's amazing what he accomplished. God accomplished it all, primarily, through just one guy – Paul (with some help from others). God didn't even need Paul. But he settled for just him and effectively said, "I'll grab the most zealous Jew I can find, one who hates the Christians and is killing them, and I'll convert him and prove I can save anyone and everyone. If I want to compel people to believe, I can, but I don't usually work that way. I let people choose!" And, sure enough, Paul became the most zealous evangelist for the Good News to the known world of his day. The contrast God set up in the *old* and *new* Paul is really amazing.

God picked a smart guy. Paul was a high-ranking Pharisee with a full benefits package in the Jewish hierarchy. He wasn't cleaning the toilets. He was a *Pharisee of Pharisees* – that's what he called himself – and a teacher of The Law. But then later in another of his letters, he said, "I count it all rubbish, all that stuff I had. It's rubbish compared to knowing Christ." That's why we never need to worry about Paul being a *con man pastor* who gets away with all kinds of scams, scandals, and fame. Such con men are fooling themselves, along with their followers. Some of them know what they're doing and do it anyway. You'd never want to trade places with them, and neither would Paul because he figured out what is really important in life.

### ***Then it pleased God (1.16)***

**Then, God was pleased to reveal his son to me so that I would proclaim to the Gentiles the Good News about Jesus.** That's what it took. It took God, revealing his Son to Paul. Hey, Paul was around at the time of Jesus. He knew who Jesus was. But he didn't *know* Jesus, personally, and he viewed him as a false messiah – as did all Pharisees. But God was pleased to reveal Jesus to Paul so he could go out and proclaim the Good News about Jesus to the Gentiles (non-Jews).

Paul then said, **When this happened, I was in no hurry to consult with any human being.** Now, that's kind of interesting because you'd think he'd want to go check with the disciples of Jesus and say, "Hey guys, here's what Jesus told me. You want to compare notes?" That's what I'd want to do! But he didn't. He didn't go and talk to anybody. He didn't rush out to consult with any human being, or the disciples of Jesus, or followers of Plato, or anybody else. **I didn't go up to Jerusalem and consult with those who were apostles of Jesus. Instead, I went off into**

**Arabia and then later I returned to Damascus.** Ha! It looks like Paul finally got to Damascus! Paul's journey in coming to know Jesus started on the road to Damascus where he was blinded by scales placed on his eyes by God. He also heard a voice from heaven saying, "Why are you persecuting me?" God put a big detour in Paul's life. Have you ever had any detours in your life? Sometimes when we're headed in one direction God says, "You'll get there, eventually, but not directly." You probably have. I sure have. It was always later in life that I discovered the purpose of my detour and how God was working in it.

Paul continues his story, **Then, three years later...** that's a pretty long time, but it gets even longer than that ... **I finally went to Jerusalem to get to know Peter. I stayed with him for fifteen days.** I'd love to hear that conversation. Talk about writing a great novel, or a book. What kind of conversations did they have and how did they start? "Hey, I'm Paul. You know, the guy that's been persecuting Christians? I'm a Christian now." Peter probably closed the door in his face. Perhaps Paul kept knocking – as Marty McFly did in *Back to the Future* until Doc Brown let him in. Maybe Paul kept on banging the door saying, "No really, it's OK. Let's talk!" It's hard to know exactly what happened, but Paul stayed with Peter for fifteen days and must have had some interesting discussions.

Paul then added this information for his readers, **The only other apostle I met with was James, the brother of Jesus.** At least one of Jesus' brothers, James, came around to believing in him. "Prophets aren't welcome in their own country," said Jesus on one occasion. Family members know each other too well. However, I would think the brothers and sisters of Jesus must have suspected something different about him. If he was sinless, as claimed by his apostles, his siblings would have noticed that Jesus never got in trouble ... or if he did, his mom and dad were



out of line. But even if they did realize this, they would probably despise Jesus even more. Can you imagine being the sibling of Jesus? You could never live up to him, even though he was just being himself. Jesus was probably the nicest guy you could ever meet; never overreacted and was always kind, loving, and selfless. Most of us are doing well when we live like this for just twenty minutes.

So, it seems his siblings did not believe in him as the Messiah while he was alive. But at some point, James, one of his brothers, became a believer. He seemed to become very committed to that early movement of following the resurrected Christ. In fact, it seems some people expected James to be the rightful *heir* to Jesus in leading Christianity. But I doubt Jesus would ever approve of such a thing since he saw himself as the final and complete solution, as the Messiah who finally came. James became an elder in the church of that day and led the council in Jerusalem. He was probably the same James who wrote the book by that name in the New Testament. There were several believers named James in that day, but this James was the brother of Jesus and Paul met with him, too.

### ***I am not lying (1.20)***

Paul further defends his apostleship as genuine. **I swear before God, what I'm writing to you is not a lie.** Now that seems to be a bit of an odd statement because a liar will always tell you the same thing. A liar is not going to say, "I tell you in the name of God ... I'm lying to you." False prophets always claim to be true ones and liars always say they're not. But still, Paul claimed to be telling the truth, and to his credit, he was really saying, "Look, I'm not fooling around here. I'm not hedging. I'm not thinking *maybe* I'm right. I'm telling you the truth!" So, I tend to view Paul in the same way I view Jesus, at least to some degree.

Both men led extraordinary, compelling lives with lots of actions to back it up. One spoke like no other man (Jesus) and the other wrote extraordinarily (Paul). It is hard not to conclude that each of these men was either genuine, big fat liars or nutcases! There is little room for anything in between. For me ... they are both the real deal!

Paul went around claiming he received revelation from Jesus, who already died and was raised from the dead. I'll bet the apostles, the original disciples of Jesus, struggled with that a little bit. "Did he really see Jesus or is he fooling us?" they may have asked themselves. Fifteen days is not that long to gain any real credibility. But Paul is making a very definite claim here in his letter. He's not hedging at all when wrote, "I am not lying."

Paul goes on in his letter, **After my visit to Jerusalem, I went north to Syria and Cilicia. The Christians in those churches didn't personally know me.** Paul had a lot working against him. He was new to Christianity, and no one wanted to get to know the guy who was dragging people out of houses and killing them. **All they knew was that everyone was saying, 'The man who once persecuted us is now preaching the same faith in Jesus that he tried to destroy.' And so, they praised God because of me.** People were probably still a little cautious. I would be! I can just hear some of them saying, "Hey George, go talk to this Paul guy and find out if he's the real deal ... and then let me know. I don't want to get tricked into getting persecuted by him." But they slowly came around, and this is a good lesson. It takes time to gain trust and build credibility. When I raised my kids, I told them, "It only takes a minute, or a second, to lose my trust by something you do or say. But it takes a long time to get it back!" It's too bad it's like this, but that's life. It takes a long time to build trust, and even longer to rebuild it after someone has lied, cheated, or been dishonest. Paul had a long, uphill journey to take. But once he got there, he gained a great

deal of respect – partly because of his changed life and partly because, perhaps, God revealed to the disciples that Paul was his man.

What I wonder about is why didn't Paul, when he was out in Arabia talking to Jesus, arrange for the disciples to go out there, see him together with Jesus, and have a reunion. It seems like this would unify all the apostles and bring them together. Why did these original apostles have to exercise faith that Paul went and talked to Jesus? It seems strange to me, but that's what he claimed had happened. It makes Paul even more difficult to trust if he went off into the desert, got together with Jesus, reported what he learned to the suspicious disciples, and then wanted to be one of them. He had a big hurdle to clear. But perhaps God wanted it to be this way so that when the disciple's trust was earned, over time, it would be spectacular; it would be solid and undeniable. They would all have to go through some real heart-felt changes and form a real relationship with each other. Paul says that the churches didn't really know him, personally. So, it took some time.

That's true of everyone. No matter who you meet for the first time, you may know *something* about them and think very highly of them. But to really trust them you have to get to know them better. That takes time and interaction. That's the beauty of really getting to know somebody and saying, "I trust you *as* a fellow believer. It's not just that I appreciate you. Instead, I fully trust you now that we have spent a lot of time together. I trust your judgment. I know you're not going to betray me."

In one of his other letters, Paul called himself *the chief of sinners*. This is probably because he was always aware of his past life and still struggled with it. Perhaps he never lived it down, completely. But he understood that he was saved by grace and not by keeping the law. He probably still struggled with having done what he did. We all struggle with things we've done, even though we know

God forgives us. It's easy to look back and say, "Wow, I wish I hadn't done that!" But that's part of life. Jesus wasn't hard on the sinners. Instead, he said, "Hey, go and sin no more because your sin is destroying you. I don't condemn you. Just go and sin no more!" Now, Jesus knew no one could become sinless in this life. So maybe he was saying, "Turn away from sin and turn to me, rest in me, and you will *sin less* and have a better, more peaceful life." He hung out with sinners, tax collectors, harlots, and other kinds of sinners, not because he approved of their lives but because he knew that they knew they needed a savior!

The sinners knew they were sinners; whereas the Pharisees (as Paul once was) did not. They thought they were righteous by keeping the Law, which they did not keep perfectly. The sinners were ready to hear the Good News, whereas the Pharisees were not. They didn't think they had any need to do so. Amazing! But Paul's conversion shows that God can turn anybody around, and he will eventually turn everybody around in eternity because his plan is to "reconcile everyone to himself."

### ***Paul's unique message***

Paul's message about Jesus was different from that of the original disciples of Jesus – not completely, but it was different. His message was, "Jesus Christ and him crucified." Peter, on the other hand, once objected when Jesus said he was going to be crucified. And so, after the crucifixion, Peter went back to fishing. There's really only one message about Jesus out there – it was out there in Paul's day and it's out there today, and it's that Jesus Christ was crucified, buried, and raised from the dead! This is why he is everything in the lives of true believers. Everything is based on the love of God displayed in Jesus. So, Peter was very hesitant about going out and saying that the crucifixion was not a mistake, even though it was the solution. But once he saw the resurrected

Jesus, it changed his life forever. He became a new bold follower of Jesus for the rest of his days.

Jesus and his cross is the solution that was established by God even before the foundation of the world. The father saw all of us and said, "My son has volunteered to deliver all of you from your sin and failure." So once Peter, and the other disciples, heard and understood this Good News message they were thrilled. But it took them a while to get used to this message of salvation promoted by Paul. It wasn't given to Peter in the same way. His message of the Good News was tailored more for Jewish believers.

This emergence of Paul as an apostle had to be an edgy thing for all of those who were established followers of Jesus. It set up some tension and God may have allowed it to humble all of them. He brought the Good News message to this come-lately, outsider (Paul) which humbled the original disciples of Jesus. But God also humbled Paul, the outsider, because he once persecuted the Christians he now joined. So, God has a way to humble everyone. Competition is common, even in ministry. Eventually, the disciples accepted Paul and his Good News message because after Jesus rose from the dead, they all understood that the message was salvation completely by God's grace, through Jesus!

Look at the difference between the New Testament book of James (the letter he wrote to Jewish believers) and the letters of Paul that he wrote to Gentile (non-Jewish) believers. James referred a lot to what Jesus taught, even quoting him many times, very much in agreement with what Matthew, Mark, and Luke wrote (John wrote much later and with a different perspective). Paul, on the other hand, didn't spend a lot of time quoting Jesus and saying, "Let me explain what Jesus meant when he spoke his parables." Instead, Paul wrote about *who* Jesus was (Son of God, Lord, Messiah) and *what* he did (crucified, raised, and ascended). He said, "I preach him, and him crucified." In other words, the *person* and *work* of Jesus, more than just his teachings.

That was Paul's Good News message – who Jesus was and what he did. He was presenting a *person* to know and have a relationship with through the Holy Spirit, not a set of doctrines. Although Paul gives some doctrines and teachings, he never attempted to present a “system of theology” as so many try to do today. It's typically human to try to figure things out and place conclusions into some logical order. But it ends up being a lot of speculations in which people become dogmatic. I've read a dozen Systematic Theologies over the past 40 years, and what I learned is to always go back to Jesus and my relationship with God, who is here, right now! We can't have a relationship with a set of writings, no matter how good and helpful they are, even if they are inspired by God in some way. But we can have a relationship with a person, God, right now, today, and forever.

Okay, we got through Galatians One. It gets very interesting in Galatians Two, which is kind of an interlude before he jumps into Three and asks them, “Who has bewitched you into going back under the law?” It is in Galatians Three that Paul gets back on his theme of the Galatians being deceived. But Galatians Two is also important, presents a lot of interesting principles, and offers a real-life illustration demonstrating what the Good News is really all about.

## 3. Getting Pulled Back (Galatians 2.1-10)

Galatians One is now behind us. But keep in mind how Paul started out, which was his setup for Galatians Two. He obviously wanted everyone to hear and embrace the gospel (Good News), but he didn't say what it is – only that false Good News messages are to be rejected. However, he'll spend the rest of his letter telling his readers exactly what this Good News is ... and is not!

### *Fourteen years later (2.1)*

In Galatians Two, Paul starts out with, **Then Fourteen years later I went back to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas.** Wow, this is like one of those books where you read a brief scene, and then it says, “And then fourteen years later...” and you wonder, “What happened during those fourteen years?” So, we can't help but wonder about what happened to Paul. We can guess. We see a changed man and a changed life, but he never gives much detail about those fourteen years. However, it's easy to conclude that during those fourteen years, he must have done a lot of thinking. He may have spent time getting revelation from Jesus in some way, getting over his violent background, and thinking everything through. Have you ever gone through something difficult and then realized there's something about the passing of time that gives you some *distance*? A counseling friend

of mine told me that people need distance from certain experiences and that time has its own way of healing, maybe not completely but there's a lot of healing that can happen over time as we gain perspective.

So, Paul didn't just jump right into his new-found life and say, "Off I go with the Good News, ready to tell people about it." God is never in a hurry to do things the right way in people's lives. Paul thought about it. He pondered it. He learned. He probably studied the Old Testament with a new perspective and learned from other people ... and from God. Perhaps he learned things he missed out on because he wasn't one of the original disciples who walked with Jesus for three years.

**After fourteen years I went back to Jerusalem again, this time with Barnabas, and Titus came with us.** So, now there's a trio. Titus was a young guy that Paul wrote a letter to many years later. And Barnabas – he wrote a letter that was very popular with the early church. It almost made it into the New Testament. But that was all decided in the Fourth century, some 300 years after Jesus, his disciples, and Paul all walked this earth. Martin Luther, and even some people today are not convinced that the Fourth Century guys got everything right when it comes to selecting the official New Testament writings. Who knows, maybe the Barnabas letter should have been included and some other writings excluded! Remember, Jesus did not promise to send the *Holy Bible*, but the *Holy Spirit*. Big difference. We can't have a relationship with a book, only with a person. And that person can only be God himself in his very own Spirit sent to indwell and guide us. Listen to him!

As far as the New Testament writings are concerned, we have what we've inherited, and it is a great collection of what early Christians believed and experienced. The New Testament writings are worthy of study and consideration, but always take every idea and thought to God who, alone, must be our *final*



authority! This letter of Paul to the Galatians is one of thirteen that he wrote (that we know of). His letters, the four Gospels, the Book of Acts, John's first letter, and Peter's first letter were all widely accepted among Christians, early on in the development of Christianity. The other seven writings existed and were read by many. But they were not officially accepted until AD 367 when Athanasius claimed the now famous 27 books to be "Scripture," adding them to the Old Testament writings resulting in the Bible widely accepted today.

Fourteen years!" Wow. That's a long time to be waiting. What was Paul doing? Just waiting? I think he was learning. I think he was processing everything that had happened to him. He was thinking about everything he'd been taught as a Jew, his role as a Pharisee, all he'd done to the Christians, and getting revelation from Jesus about what the Good News is. That's a lot of stuff to process. God could have just infused it in him, but he doesn't work that way. God takes time with all of us so that we will learn over time, and learn well. It takes time for this to happen properly. Never be impatient with God, though impatience is very human. He understands this and stays patient with us. And it's always OK.

Keep in mind that God's already got somebody out there who's ahead of us doing good things and accomplishing what he has for them. Most likely they had to wait on God, too! But, at some point, they will drop off at the other end of life, and as we grow and move on, we take their place. And then, eventually, somebody takes our place! God is never disadvantaged by us. It's like a big conveyor belt that he maintains. So don't be in a hurry to be where you're *not* supposed to be. Just take your time and be where you *are* supposed to be. If God wants you to be in a different place, he'll take you there. He will! A year from today you may be in a different place than you expected and prayed for.

## ***God revealed that I should go (2.2)***

Paul continues, **I went there because God had revealed to me that I should go.** Well, that's a good reason! **While I was there, I met privately with those considered to be church leaders and I shared with them the message I was preaching to the Gentiles.** So, Paul went and met with the original disciples and any other leaders that had emerged, and said to them, "Here's the message I'm giving to the non-Jews, what do you think?" **I wanted to make sure we were all in agreement and that my efforts were not in vain. I didn't want to be running life's race for nothing.** It's okay to be insecure (and even humble) about ministry. It's normal. It's human. I like Paul because he's real. He's not some ideal Christian or the perfect guy that's got it all worked out. He struggles with things. He wonders if he's wasting his time.

**They all supported me, and they didn't demand that my companion, Titus, be circumcised even though he was a Gentile.** Now that's a big thing for Jewish Christians because they instinctively wanted to hang on to rituals, laws, and a lot of other Jewish traditions, mingling them with this new message about Jesus. This is what this whole letter of Galatians is all about ... not mixing law and grace, and not going back under some set of laws.

So, Paul was really happy with their response to him as the new guy on the team. He told them his understanding of the Good News about Jesus and they said, "Yeah, we accept you and Titus, and he doesn't need to do circumcision or other rituals." Keep in mind that rituals are okay, as long as we realize the ritual itself is not the important thing. It's what that ritual symbolizes and points to that counts! If you don't want to do rituals, you don't have to. Baptism, Lord's Table (Communion, Eucharist), going to church, reading the Bible, etc. – none of these are *required*

by God. However, if these rituals enhance your relationship with God and help you better understand the realities they represent, that's great! The problem is people start making rituals into rules, regulations, and requirements, and start *lording them over* other people. This is what *religion* is all about, controlling people with rules and regulations. Paul's going to disclose all such nonsense throughout his letter as we move on in it.

### ***Some so-called Christians (2.4a)***

In verse four Paul writes, **The issue of circumcision came up only because some so-called Christians, the false ones, were secretly mingling among us.** This question about Titus needing to be circumcised (obey a ritual) came up because certain people infiltrated the fellowship of believers – the community of faith – trying to bring The Law back in with them. Now, maybe they were trying to be destructive and undermine Paul's Good News message, or maybe they were genuinely unaware of the beauty and wonder of grace, and freedom from the law that it brings. But either way, they were the false teachers according to Paul, who were secretly bringing in falsehood.

Anytime people do something in secret, they are usually up to no good. No matter what you do or what you believe, do it openly and honestly. Never undermine anyone, even if you disagree with them. Entrust other people to God and don't try to control them. Who knows, maybe they are right and someday you will learn you are wrong and will change your mind. That's what Paul did! If you've got to sneak around, call people names, label them in order to dismiss them, and you can't just say, "Here's what I believe and I love you no matter what," then you don't really believe what you claim. If you can't have that level of confidence, you probably don't have the real deal, and then you'll resort to forcing your views on people.

## ***They sneaked in to spy (2.4b)***

Paul goes on, **They sneaked in to spy on us and to try to take away the freedom we have in Jesus.** Religious people don't want you to have freedom because their power comes from your bondage! Bondage to rituals, regulations, requirements, obligations, conforming, etc. They're always the *smarter* ones, the *better* ones. They know it all, and you know not nearly enough. Watch out for this kind of thing.

We have freedom! We're free from the law. We're free in Christ to be perfect in Him, even though we still sin and struggle in it somewhat. Our focus should not be on our sins and failures. Sure, we need to acknowledge them. Yes, OK, I'm a sinner, that's true. To deny this would be wrong. But most religious people go too far the other way and overly focus on sin at the expense of living in the freedom God has given them. The more we focus on our sin (beyond just admitting to God that we are indeed sinners) the more we will tend to sin because we are not focused on the solution of living in Christ and trusting God to completely save us. It is tragic. Don't get me wrong; we should not be *trying* to sin, either. But if we're always trying to *not* sin, we're still thinking about and focusing on our sin instead of the solution that is found only when we focus on God, his grace, and how much he loves and has forgiven us.

This is why Paul wrote in Romans chapter six, "Consider yourself dead to sin." He did not say to "consider yourself sinless!" He wanted people to know that we are dead to sin because we have been crucified with Christ and raised from the dead along with him. Sin is inactive in our lives when we walk in the Spirit, even though we occasionally fall back into sin and fall away from the Spirit. This is a lifelong challenge that everyone

experiences. But the goal is to walk daily with Christ and live an *instinctive life* in Him, just as Jesus did with the Father when he was here on earth. If you do that, it will be your best shot at living a life of peace and joy, walking with God, and messing up less in life.

But still, we are never perfect in and of ourselves. However, we can be perfect as the *new person* that we are in Jesus. This seems to be the spiritual secret of life. The New Testament tells us to “walk in the Spirit and you won't fulfill the desires of the flesh” (our human, fallen nature). If we try really hard not to sin, live like there's a *law of requirement* placed over us by God, and that we've got to keep that law ... we will never be successful. We've only set ourselves up for more failure.

**They wanted to enslave us and force us to keep their Jewish laws and regulations. However, we refused to give in to them for even a single moment. Our goal was to maintain the truth about the Good News message for all of you.** These people who were sneaking in had an agenda, and it was to force (if they could) the law back on these believers. It was most likely just strong persuasion and propaganda. Paul's response was to fight against these intruders, protect the truth of the Good News message, and therefore protect the newfound freedom these new believers had gained. Paul knew, as he would spend the rest of his letter explaining, that bondage comes from being under the law, and freedom is found only in understanding the grace of God as it is expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It wasn't just the ideas and beliefs they were fighting over; it was the people themselves and their allegiance, along with all that comes with it – money, power, prestige, etc. But Paul, in presenting his Good News message, sought none of these things for himself. He wanted people to be free – freedom from the bondage of the law and from those who hold people under it. He wanted for them real freedom that only comes from God, by his grace,

through Jesus! So, we need to live in the truth of the Good News message about Jesus, and we need never give in to those who want to take away our freedom and enslave us with religion, law, rules, regulations, and all the things they *claim* God requires. But he doesn't require any of it!

However, this doesn't mean some of those things they require aren't good to do for the right reasons. Reading the Bible, going to church, telling others about your faith, and helping them in any way you can are all good things. But God doesn't *require* any of them. He doesn't say, "You've got to do these things, and then I'll accept you." Instead, God says, "I love and accept you just the way you are, right now. But let's work on getting your life together." For some people, that might include going to church. I know people who don't go to church, and they're twice as much of a "Christian" as some others who do go to church. And, of course, the opposite is also true. The point is that God does not require anything of us, he only invites us to come and have a relationship with him so we can grow, learn, become a better person, and live in freedom and peace!

**The leaders of the church seemed to have nothing to add to all I was preaching.** It looks like what he was preaching was complete, and they liked it! **Their reputation as great leaders wasn't important to me because I know God has no favorites.** It looks like Paul's placing himself up on their level and bringing them down to his. Perhaps, this was in order. Paul came late to the party, late to the situation, late as a follower of Jesus. He wasn't an original disciple and there were, by then, a lot of people in leadership. So, there may have been a little tension between the old guard (who were the disciples of Jesus and Paul), and the new voice of Paul coming along, bringing Barnabas and taking the Good News message to the Gentiles. Sometimes the original Jewish Christians had a vision that was too small. They didn't always realize what a worldwide message of grace and

salvation this was. Paul was defending his authority as a full apostle, at least as an equal with all of them. So, he said, “Their reputation as great leaders made no difference to me.” They had gained a reputation among Christians, and rightly so, but Paul reminds them that God doesn't have favorites. Perhaps Paul was thinking, “If God had favorites, he sure wouldn't have chosen me!”

### ***Proclaiming the Good News (2.7)***

**Instead, they realized that God had given me the responsibility of proclaiming the Good News to the Gentiles, in the same way that he had given Peter the responsibility of preaching it to the Jews.**

That's interesting. There's a lot of this going on in ministry today. Different people do different things, legitimately. Everybody can't, and shouldn't, do the same thing. We don't have enough time or the same abilities. Plus, everybody doesn't *want* to do the same thing. As a result, I try to honor people who have other ministries and are involved in different aspects of service to people. Child Evangelism Fellowship is a good example. They have a different ministry than that of most churches. They're constantly bringing kids into Good News Clubs, teaching them about Jesus, and trying to build them up as children with good morals and an understanding of who God is. They're investing in the future by investing in these little kids. Ya can't beat that! Churches have a different and more general purpose.

**The same God who works through Peter as the apostle of the Jews also works through me as the apostle to the Gentiles.** So, Peter and Paul each had their own ministry – both really important ones. Peter had the job of helping people to come out of Judaism and get free from the law. Paul helped Gentiles (non-Jews) to discover Jesus without living under the

law. Paul even tried doing Peter's job and he finally said something like, "Ya know, I'm going to turn my attention to the Gentiles. They're easier to deal with. When I work with them, I don't have to *undo* a bunch of legalism and slavish devotion to the Law. I'm free to just help them get right with God."

So, Paul went out everywhere in the civilized, Western world and told Gentiles about *Christ and him crucified*. People everywhere responded with, "Yes, I'm interested." As a result of Paul's efforts, Christianity grew rapidly and vastly. But when he took the message of *salvation by grace through Jesus* to Jewish persons, he found they had a lot of *law baggage*, just as he once had, that was hard for them to shed.

But for Peter, ministering to the Jews and ushering them out of legalism into following Jesus was his joy. Many probably struggled their whole lives, shedding their many years of being told they must keep the law to be right with God. We have a lot of that going on today. Many religious people – me included – were taught, over and over, that we must do something, even if it is just belief, to keep from going to hell forever. Such guilt, fear, and bondage are very controlling, and breaking free into grace is not easy. But God is at work in everyone's life and will eventually prevail in "reconciling everyone to himself." This is the essence of the Good News message!

Eventually, Christianity became pretty much a Gentile religion with only a few Jewish people. That's even true today. But Christianity, as a religion, has been successful in both good and bad ways. In some ways, it spread like crazy after the Third Century. Over here in the Western church – in our Western part of the world with all our inheritance from Roman Catholicism – the Good News of *salvation is by grace* still goes out for all to hear. Most Christians believe this message, to some degree, and it's very different than Judaism and the law from which it originated.

For a religion that's gone through a lot of changes, Christianity is pretty darn successful. After Constantine and his



Edict of Milan (an edict of tolerance), the church converted the Roman Empire to Christianity. But unfortunately, the Roman Empire also changed Christianity! These two institutions mingled and brought about the monstrous combination of Church and State that prevailed in the Middle Ages. However, some of the damage done was corrected by the Reformation ... but not completely!

Despite all this, the gospel, the Good News, remains and shines today. It's alive and well, to the degree that people understand it, believe it, and accept that God saved his world by grace, unearned by any of us through the person and work of Jesus on the cross. We need only say, "God did this for me, thank you so much," and then we can accept it and bask in the grace God has bestowed on all of us!

### ***Pillars of the church (2.9a)***

In verse nine Paul identifies some prominent leaders and his relationship with them. **James, Peter, and John, who were known among many as the 'pillars of the church,' recognized my gift of preaching the Good News that God had given me.** Wow, that's good. Paul had the top three guys on his side: Peter, James, and John. **They accepted both Barnabas and me as co-workers.** Paul was an ex-Pharisee Jew and Barnabas was one of the earliest known followers of Jesus. But neither of them was one of the original Twelve. The name Barnabas means, "Son of Encouragement!" I assume he lived up to his name and that's why Paul chose him. So, they received Paul and his cohort, Barnabas, as fellow co-workers. This is a good thing when we see people working together in ministry. It's sometimes a miracle because, even in the best of situations, the longer people work together the more they discover their differences and struggle with each other. God is always at work

to bring unity, but he allows us to destroy that unity and learn from it. It's all part of what life is about – learning and preparing to live with God forever!

### ***They encouraged us (2.9b)***

**So, they encouraged us to keep on preaching to the Gentiles while they continued preaching to the Jews.** That's probably a good solution to the potential dangers mentioned above. Each person in ministry (which means “to serve”) should go the way they feel led. It's not up to anyone else to decide. This means other people are free to embrace them or just let them do their thing. The diversity with which God has created us needs to be respected and appreciated, knowing that if someone else out there is doing something wrong God can, and will, correct them in his time and in his way!

For example, when Paul ministered to Gentiles (non-Jews), he didn't require them to get circumcised, be baptized, keep the law, attend festivals, have special days, or anything else. But Peter and others who worked with Jewish people coming out of Judaism *let* them keep those traditions. But, of course, they didn't say they *had* to observe them either! I'm sure they warned them, as did Paul, to not allow anything to replace the grace of God so lavished on them in Jesus and all he had done for them on the cross. This whole theme of being free from the bondage of the Law and working to earn something with God will come up many times by Paul in this letter. As long as Christ reigns supreme in their thoughts, hearts, and lives – that's what counts!

And it follows that this is what we need to do, too. Or, I should say, that's what we are *free* to do! That's the way I look at church. I am free to go, or not go. I know it is not a requirement by God. When I go it's a good thing, but it's not essential. I worship God before, during, and after going to church because it

is my 24/7 lifestyle in Christ. And so, I *pray without ceasing* (as Paul wrote in another of his letters), because I am always walking with and talking to God. Prayer at church is a good thing, but that's not the *best* or *only* place we can pray! Most importantly, remember that *the church* is not a building. It's people! Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am also." Wow, that changes everything, takes a big religious load off, and launches us all into real freedom and peace by knowing God, personally.

So, there were two fronts in early Christianity. The Jewish religion that Christianity emerged from, and those who never were a part of Judaism (Gentiles, who were easier converts to the Christian Faith). We see this contrast today. Have you ever tried to correct, or undo somebody's religious biases and indoctrination? It is nearly impossible (not that it is our responsibility to do so). I have found that the people who are not strongly religious, nor embedded in any religion or church (as was the case of the Gentiles) are often more open and easier to talk to. I tell them that God is a great, wonderful, merciful, loving God who's never going to quit loving them. I tell them that God always wants to save, rescue, and redeem them and that he's never going to give up on them. Their response is usually, "I don't know about that, but that's interesting. I'm willing to consider it."

On the other hand, if I give a religious person this same high view of God who's a savior that doesn't fail, they tend to get mad at me and call me a heretic or false teacher. Try it sometime! Once a person gets a strong religious bias of any kind (Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, etc.), it's very hard to get them unglued from it. We're all like this to some degree, but the more steeped we are in religion, the less able we are to consider the possibility that we *might* be wrong. It was no different in Paul's day. When he confronted Jews (the religious folks), they violently opposed him. That's who he once was! But when he shared the Good News

message about Jesus with the Gentiles (who were much less steeped in religion) he had much greater success.

## ***Helping the poor (2.10)***

**Their only suggestion was that we keep helping the poor, which I have always been eager to do.** Their suggestion wasn't, "Let's go see how many big cars we can acquire," or fancy houses, or anything else related to living extravagantly. It was, "Let's help the poor." That was always in Jesus's heart, too. Paul's response to their suggestion was, "I'm in!"

I know of a small church in LA. It's pretty big for a home-style church, but 100% of their financial giving collected each week goes to helping people in the community. They have no salaries, and yet they still function. It's pretty much all volunteer workers! Everybody contributes their time and abilities together. They don't need salaries, they don't need benefits, they don't need funds or a budget. They just collect what comes in and they go help people until the money's gone. Then they collect it again the next week. So, what was suggested to Paul *can* be done! But when there is a big church with a big organization, there is also a lot of overhead that must be supported. In these larger operations lots of money goes to salaries and benefits. So, perhaps, the lesson is ... keep ministry small and simple!

Helping the poor, watching out for those who have less, and not going after wealth and prestige in this world were the common motivations of Paul and the original disciples. In a letter written by James, he identifies what *true religion* is. For him, it boiled down to two things: first, helping widows and orphans, and second, focusing on the spiritual life. Pretty simple. James knew it was not good to go around trying to get everyone else straightened out. That's *bad* religion. It takes up so much time

and attention that there is little time left to genuinely help others.

## 4. Paul's Rebuke (Galatians 2.11-16)

In this second half of Galatians Two, Paul describes a real-life situation that's a good example of what the Good News is all about. Paul always points out the difference between the false and true gospel, between law and grace, and between the old and new persons that we were and now are.

### *I oppose him to his face (2.11)*

Here is the situation as Paul described it. **When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him directly because what he was doing was very wrong.** Now this verse alone tells me Peter was not a Pope. He, for sure, wasn't Pope over the whole church, nor was he in any way the *first* Pope. Paul wouldn't be doing this rebuke – especially as the newest member of the team – if Peter was considered the Pope of Christianity (the first Pope). If he were, Paul would rightly be kissing his ring instead of rebuking him.

It appears that Roman Catholicism *reverse-engineered* the existence of Popes all the way back into the First Century. In about the fourth Century, they started calling past leaders *Popes*. They listed all those who were head bishops of the Church in Rome dating back to Peter and called them all “Popes” to support

their claim of a succession of authority. That's how it looks to me, anyway.

That's kind of clever, but there is no indication of Peter being any kind of supreme leader in the early church, except for one verse in the Gospels about Peter being given the *keys to the kingdom* by Jesus. For sure, Jesus had something in mind for Peter, but it is not clear just what that was. It is doubtful that he was installing him as some kind of Pope to oversee all Christians. For sure, Peter and Paul both had prominent ministries in the church, but to turn either one into some kind of Pope seems unwarranted. When I read this story in Galatians Two, Peter and Paul seem to be, at least, equal in authority in this situation.

### ***When he first arrived (2.12a)***

**When he first arrived, he ate with the Gentile Christians who were not circumcised.** Okay, that's good. That's nice because Peter was a Jew. There were Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians and Peter was hanging out with them and willing to eat with them. Note that these are Gentile Christians who were not circumcised and who did not observe all the Jewish rituals and laws. Circumcision was *the* big Jewish ritual, but we can plug anything in for it when applying these principles of Paul's letter to our lives.

**But afterward, when some friends of James came, Peter refused to eat with the Gentiles anymore.** A bunch of Jews showed up who were associated with Peter's previous life and this created *peer pressure* on Peter. Have you ever been under any peer pressure at church, feeling like you must conform to the group and not think for yourself? Kids in high school aren't the only ones with peer pressure! Adults experience it all the time and they probably give in to it just as fast, or even quicker, than high school

kids. I've certainly experienced it over the years, but I learned that we all must decide, "Am I gonna let this shape my behavior, my beliefs, and my treatment of other people?" Peer pressure can happen in politics, it can happen in a business, it can happen at church, and it can happen within a family. Peer pressure demands that you must act like, talk like, and smell like the exclusive group of folks. Otherwise, you may be shunned, called names, rejected, and sometimes expelled from the community. So, once the Jews started showing up, Peter started worrying about, "What are they gonna think of me?"

### ***Afraid of criticism (2.12b)***

**He was afraid of criticism from these people because they all insisted on everyone being circumcised.** When grace is not understood, the default is always keeping some law or requirement. For these Jews that Peter encountered, it was the necessity of a ritual – circumcision. That was the bottom line. However, any ritual observed today by religious people could easily be substituted. It's all about, "You've got to do something that we think God requires to be in good favor with him," instead of, "Hey folks, God has saved you no matter what, freely by His grace, and that's why you're in good stead with him!" Law-keepers will always respond with, "Sure, God did some of that grace stuff, but you still need to do something like circumcision, or believe, or do good deeds, or go to church, or read your Bible." But you don't have to do any of these things! None are requirements of God – good as all those things *can* be.

Once you see the problem, the disadvantage, and the bondage of being under the law – actually, *any* law that requires something of you in addition to God's grace – you will never go back! The freedom is just too wonderful and it's something God intended us to enjoy and rest in. So, maybe Paul's placement of



this situation in his letter acts as groundwork for all the explaining and teaching that will follow. He is, perhaps, saying, “Let me demonstrate *law vs grace* in a real-life situation.” It’s a little bit backward from a lot of his letters where he usually gives a bunch of factual information and then finishes with practical application.

Keep in mind that peer pressure can grow and morph into all kinds of things. This doesn't mean that everything that happens at church is bad. There are plenty of good things at church, but there's also always *some* hypocrisy. It’s just human nature playing out, and there is sometimes a double standard. To be free from peer pressure and legalism in all areas of life is not possible. But we can choose to be aware of it and not join others in it.

Freedom is a wonderful thing. *Spiritual* freedom is the ultimate freedom because no one can ever take it from you once you possess it. You can try to tell people, “Hey, you can be free too.” But they will often get mad at you because their religious bondage does not allow them to go into that state of mind where God is big – really big – and cannot be any bigger or better. This kind of God is something religion just cannot allow. They never fully experience the freedom that God wants them to have. So, there was a lot for Peter to be afraid of in criticism from these Jews who insisted on the necessity of circumcision (required rituals).

### ***Infectious Hypocrisy (2.13)***

**As a result, other Jewish Christians followed Peter's hypocrisy, and even Barnabas was led astray.** Peer pressure can spread. Paul saw through this. And was it because Paul was so self-righteous and the cleanest-cut guy on the block? No. Look at what Paul went through. Look at all the legalism he lived in and experienced. He knew the power of peer pressure. He had placed

that burden on himself and everyone else, every day. That's probably why God picked him to spread the Good News about the cross of Christ and all the freedom it brings. It brought freedom for Paul, and he wanted others to experience it, too. God gave him fourteen years to think about it. So even though Paul wasn't an original disciple walking around with Jesus, he somehow jumped ahead of the class when it came to God's grace in salvation from sin, having to keep the Law, and other imposed human requirements.

### ***Not following the truth (2.14)***

Paul goes on to describe this situation and build his case for what the Good News is really all about. **When I saw they were not following the truth of the Good News, I asked Peter in front of all the others ...** Note that there's a correct time to confront someone in front of others. There's another time to pull someone aside privately and say, "Hey, I want to talk to you about your behavior." Maybe Paul decided that since Peter's hypocrisy was public, the solution in the form of a rebuke also needed to be public.

So, Paul rebuked Peter by asking him a question. **Since you are a Jew by birth, you've discarded the Jewish laws, and you now live like a Gentile, why are you trying to make Gentiles follow Jewish traditions like circumcision?** Paul was really asking, "Why the hypocrisy, Peter? You have the answers in the form of the Good News about Jesus. You demonstrated this just the other day when you were eating with the Gentiles. But when these Jewish guys who keep the Law showed up, all of a sudden you wanted to go back under the law?" Good question, Paul! We could all ask ourselves this kind of question in many situations in life.

## ***Jews by birth (2.15)***

Paul continues his rebuke. **You and I are Jews by birth, not sinners like the Gentiles.** Now, of course, Peter and Paul were both “sinners,” and Paul was fully aware of that. But the typical Jewish view of Gentiles was that they were dirty, rotten sinners, living apart from God. Maybe Paul’s point was that at least those *dirty rotten sinners* weren't hypocrites! They just sin openly – like going to the bar and hooking up with somebody or taking some drugs and not thinking much of it. They just do it. But hypocrites like Peter claim one thing (freedom from the law, in his case), then act in a different way when peer pressure comes. Pharisees, which Paul was in his former life, were doing all kinds of law-breaking behind the scenes, yet publicly they acted like they had it all together. Jesus was ten times harder on the hypocrites, the Pharisees, and the religious establishment than he was on the regular shameless sinners.

In fact, Jesus wasn't hard on them at all. He said, “Go and sin no more.” He was clearly telling them not to sin, but he never had any occasion to rebuke them for being hypocrites as he did the Pharisees. The sinners were in the mindset of, “Well, OK, I'm a sinner and I don't know what to do about it.” The Pharisees were pretending like they really had it together and were somehow above everyone, getting people to think highly of them. I always like to ask people, “If Jesus came back today, who would the Pharisees be?” Wouldn't it have to be someone in an organized, institutional religion who assumes they are right and everyone else is wrong? Wouldn't Jesus be just as hard on them, and wouldn't they want to kill him for calling them out? This is, indeed, a soul-searching question for everyone today.

## ***Made right with God (2.16a)***

Paul now becomes a little more philosophical, takes the focus off of Peter, and puts it on the Good News message. **We know people are made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, not by obeying the law.** Understand that when Paul says we are *made right* with God, that's the word “justified” in Greek. This English word is the word of choice by many translators of the New Testament. They tend to translate that verse, “We know that a person is *justified* with God by faith in Jesus Christ.” But in the translation used here, in this commentary, it spells out the meaning of the word *justified*, which is “to be made right,” or to come into a right relationship.

The word justified is not another word for *saved*. It doesn't mean “to get saved from going to hell.” That's not what justification is about. If you think about it, a person can only be *made right* with (come into a relationship with) God by believing in him – by exercising faith. We cannot know God if we don't believe he exists! Our act of faith does not earn us anything with God, thus preventing Him from doing something horrible to us in eternity. God does not say, “Oh, good, you finally believe in me. Now I won't have to send you to hell to be eternally punished.”

When we exercise faith, we're *made right* with God in that we enter into a right relationship with him, engage with him, listen to him, love him, and benefit from having an active faith. How else can we have fellowship with God, if we don't first believe in him? How else can we walk with him daily, pray, and learn from him if we don't believe? We can't! It is impossible. So, our faith does not *earn* us anything with God, it only enables us to *gain* from having an active relationship with him! Believing isn't what we do to merit something with God. It's something we do to put ourselves in a right relationship with him so we can grow and learn. But again, there's no merit. There's no merit in faith. It's something

we *need* to do, but we only do so to experience God, not to escape some kind of retaliation by him.

Paul's contrast is clear: we're made right by *faith*, not by *law*. Obeying the law doesn't get us right with God. It never could and it never will. You might be doing some right things in life and that is always good. But often, religious people try so hard to obey the law and not sin that they end up sinning more. They sin behind the scenes; they know it, they hide it, and they deny it. What Paul is saying is that faith pleases God because when we have faith and quit trying not to sin, we'll start walking with God, engaging with him, and enjoying our relationship with him. We're going to grow with him. We'll be *one* with him, just as Jesus was one with the Father and invited us to join him in it. All these good things will come out of our faith when it is genuine and not turned into a work that earns something with God. When we believe and walk with God, daily, our sin problem takes care of itself.

However, realize that our sin will never be totally gone. We're not going to quit sinning, completely. We won't be *sinless*, but we will *sin less*. That's why Paul wrote, "We're made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, not by obeying the law." Otherwise, we end up *trying* to obey ... and failing.

### ***And we have believed (2.16b)***

Paul continues his excellent conclusion, **We have believed in Jesus Christ so that we can be made right with God because of our faith in Jesus, not because we've obeyed a bunch of laws.** He is saying the same thing he just did, above, but stretching it out a little bit to bring additional clarification. Then he adds, **No one will ever be made right with God by obeying laws.**

There are two things to consider here. First, nobody's ever going to be made right with God by obeying the law, because nobody *can* obey it fully. But second, even if someone did obey it, that still wouldn't make them right with God because they've got to have a relationship with him, know him, and walk with him. Law, requirements, and legalism are not really the issues. Relationship is! It is a *relationship* that is the solution, not *religion*. If you ever figure this out and say, "I don't need religion *about* God; I need a relationship *with* God," you're home free. Big distinction!

We're all equal before God and faith is the *great equalizer* that places everyone on the same level before God. This is because keeping the law doesn't get us right with God, faith does. Faith is a very simple thing that puts us in a right relationship with God – a place where we can begin to grow at our pace, our way, and in God's time, which is different for everyone. So, nobody has to be above anybody else, even though we may know someone older and wiser who has progressed further in life. That doesn't make them more important. It took them a while to get where they are, and many other people are still getting there. It's about our relationship with God right now and about our relationship with each other.

## 5. Christ Lives in Me (Galatians 2.17-21)

### *Led into sin? (2.17)*

Paul marches on in his letter, **Suppose we seek to be made right with God through our faith in Jesus, and then someone declares us guilty because we no longer keep the law. Would that mean that Christ has led us into sin?** Let's say we do such seeking in Christ, and then we're found guilty (by legalistic people) of breaking some religious law because we trusted God and his grace through Jesus. Could we conclude that trusting Jesus instead of obeying the law is, effectively, an act of Christ leading us into sin – the sin of abandoning the law? Paul asks this question, perhaps, because some were making this accusation against those who were now believing in Jesus rather than keeping the long-established law of Moses.

Once we're made right with God through faith ... and that's *not* when God accepts us, thinks we're okay, and quits wanting to condemn us! When we have faith, we come into a right relationship with God. We're *made right* with him. It's the word *justified* but it means "to make right." We don't earn anything when we believe; we don't earn anything by our faith. Think about this: If you believe in God, right now, you can have a relationship with him, right now, and you are right with him. How else could

you ever be in a right relationship with God if you don't believe in him? Right? This is because if we don't believe and go on living our life apart from knowing God, then it is impossible to be made right (justified) with him. So, *getting right* with God by faith doesn't mean we earn something, it just means we come into an experiential relationship with God based on what he *already* did in Jesus. Salvation is not earned by our faith. Our faith is just our proper response. It's OK to seek to be *made right* with God through faith and come into a right relationship with him. That is the normal path that people take. But when we do this, we've earned nothing with God.

Paul's answer to "Does Christ lead us into sin when we abandon the law?" is emphatic. **Absolutely not! Quite the opposite. I'm a sinner if I rebuild (in my mind) that old system of law that I already tore down.** Actually, it was Jesus who tore down that old useless system of the law that could never save anyone. All we do is get on board, by faith in what God has *already* done for us. However, it is true that we must decide to abandon the law and turn to Christ in faith. So, really, the opposite is true. We are not acting in sin if we abandon the law, we are sinning if we rebuild the old system of law that Jesus already tore down for us. A little later in this letter, Paul will talk about how all of our sins and wrongdoings were nailed to the cross, torn down, and taken away.

Then Paul writes, **The more I tried to keep the law, the more it condemned me.** If we try to keep the law of Moses or any other set of requirements created by people, we won't be able to. When we try, what happens? We take on the identity of a *dirty rotten sinner*. We condemn ourselves! Or worse, we *act* like we're keeping whatever requirements we've placed on ourselves to make everyone think highly of us ... and now we're hypocrites. Everyone knows, deep down in their heart, when they're being



hypocritical. However, there are a few individuals who are so lost in hypocrisy that they're not even aware of it. In their arrogance, they are blinded by it. This was the case of the Pharisees, as Paul once was. This kind of deception can (and does) happen to people. They usually think they're the most righteous person in the room, but they're not. It's their illusion.

So, Paul has made a key point above in asking, "Suppose we seek to be made right with God through faith in Christ, and then we're found guilty because we have abandoned the law?" In other words, if we say to ourselves, "I'm just going to live any old way I want," and sometimes we do. But would that mean that Christ led us into sin? No way. Christ didn't lead us into sin. Quite the opposite, He's the one who led us *out* of sin by taking our sin away from us and onto himself! Paul admitted he was a sinner. He once called himself the *chief of sinners*. That's why he concluded above that if he tried to rebuild the old system of law – in other words, go back under the law – he would never be free because he would be denying all that Jesus did for him, things he could never do for himself.

Unfortunately, many churches today do this. They take people back under the law (or sometimes just come up with their own set of requirements) and try to hold people to them. I don't know if they fully realize what they are doing. It could be that they once had this done to them – they were placed under some kind of law. Then they instinctively place others under that same law of requirements, thinking that they are doing the right thing and helping people. This often gets passed down from generation to generation, keeping people under some law by repeating it over and over, often from an early age. It is hard to escape such bondage, and the Good News about Jesus is the only path to freedom.

Guilt, fear, and peer pressure are all powerful controlling influences. Take a look at your own life. Are you in any kind of

bondage that has been imposed on you, rather than being free in the grace of God and all that it brings?

### ***When I tried to keep the law (2.19)***

Paul continues, **I died to the law. I stopped trying to meet all its requirements so that I might live for God instead.** We can't start living for God until we first stop trying to keep the law. "I died to the law," said Paul, and that's what he also wrote in his letter to the Romans, chapter six. He considered himself *dead* to the law – inactive. The law became irrelevant in Paul's life, and so he wrote, "I stopped trying to meet all these requirements," (because he couldn't) "so that I might live for God." The key is that he turned from *trying to not sin* to *living for God* and living *in* him. This is huge. Trying to keep the law and not sin, won't work. Frankly, the more we focus on sin, the more we'll sin. But, the more we turn to God and say, "God, I'm going to walk with you. Yes, I'm aware that I'm a sinner, but I'm not going to dwell on it," the more sin starts to take care of itself as we walk with God and gain strength from him. This is because we are becoming more like God, more like Christ. We no longer want to do wrong, even though we still do sometimes. Our desires change, our focus changes, our outlook on life and how we see people – that all changes.

We can even be more patient with people who are messing up in life. This includes people at church, many of whom have a lot of problems. Perhaps that's why they're there. Even leaders can mess up, too. They are just as human as anyone and need what Jesus has done for them just like the rest of us. To their credit, most of them are aware of this and do well walking with God – but not all of them!

Keep in mind that church can be a very good experience for many people. But, in and of itself, it's not where the solution is.

You might learn *about* the solution which is “Christ in you as the hope of glory,” but the solution itself is in Jesus. It isn't found in an institution. It's not found in doing good things – although the solution may *include* doing good things. The real solution is not even in the Bible, even though this commentary is a study of the New Testament writings of Paul. The ultimate solution isn't in any historical document. Those may tell you *about* Jesus, God, and other essential things. But at some point, you've got to close *the book* and say, “God, I need to talk to you – just you and me together. I need to know if all this stuff I've been reading is true or false, and I need to know what you have for me, just one person in billions that you have created.” If you don't get to that point, you're just trying to have a relationship with a book, which you can't! It's not a person. Remember, Jesus didn't promise to send the Holy Bible, he promised to send the Holy Spirit, a person to indwell you. The bottom line is that it's got to be about you and God.

Now, all of this is really important because if we still try to keep the law and do its requirements, we're not going to be able to live for God because we're living to try to *appease* God. So, Paul says, “When I tried to keep the law, it condemned me.” The reason it condemned him was because he couldn't keep it. Hey, go try it for yourself. Go try to live a perfect life for just one day. I had a Mormon friend I used to ride to work with and he told me that he went *days* without sinning. And so, I asked him, “Can I ask your wife about that?” He said, “No.” That's because he knew that she knew he didn't *really* go days without sinning! That question kind of put it in perspective for him because he felt like he was living a pretty good life. Until we quit trying to bring our own righteousness, keep the law, and appease God, we're not going to be able to live *for* him and have a relationship with him. Trying to keep the law – any law – is only going to get in the way.

## ***It is no longer I who live (2.20)***

After saying how he stopped trying to meet all the law's requirements in order to live for God, Paul goes on and tells how this all works! **My old self has been crucified with Christ. I'm no longer the one who is living, but Christ lives in me.** Oh, this is so good! This passage is famous and it's so encouraging. "My old self has been crucified with Christ." Thank God for that. Even though I still experience some sin in my life, and I still have my old nature hanging around, it has basically been crucified with Christ. I'm no longer the one that's living. Well, obviously I am still living, but I think we all know what Paul means. We are all alive and breathing, but *real* life is so much more than just that. Life is not all about me anymore, instead, it is Christ that lives *in* me. If Christ lives in you, your life's going to be different. Perfect? Nope. Better? Yes. Much better!

Obviously, we live and breathe and do things. Yet, ultimately, we do not bring life to ourselves. Compared to me trying to keep the law and do what's right, now Christ lives *in* me. It's him living *through* me. He's not living *instead* of me; he's living through me, and the result is what he's doing in my life. This does not mean I live it perfectly every second of every day with no error whatsoever. It just means I am directly involved with God, he's with me, and my "old nature" has been crucified with Christ. Now there's a bit of a dilemma here. We really are a *new person* in Christ, and yet we have this *old nature* hanging around and plaguing us. Have you ever experienced this? Paul lamented this dilemma in his letter to the Romans (chapter seven) when he confessed that he did things he did not want to do, and did not do things he did want to do. I think we can all relate to this.

This is why Paul concluded above with, "No longer do I live, but Christ lives in me." How else can Paul word this using mere human language? Some things are beyond explanation and sometimes we have to experience it and say, "Okay, that's pretty

good wording. I understand what it means, but I'm not sure I can fully explain it." This may have been how Paul felt in trying to capture this great truth. I sense that somehow Christ is living in people and it's not themselves, alone, that are living that life. They may think, "It's not me who's living it, even though I am the one who's living it!" It's a new, different, and interesting kind of experience.

Then Paul continues explaining, **I live in this earthly body, trusting in the Son of God. He is the one who loved me and gave himself for me. Therefore, I do not treat the grace of God as something that is meaningless. If keeping the law could make us right with God, then Christ did not need to die.** If that were true, if Jesus did not need to die, we could just take care of our sin problem ourselves by doing what's right and solving our problems on our own. If that were the case, we wouldn't need a Savior. But whether we realize it or not, we do need a Savior because we can't keep the law and rescue ourselves by our own doing. Whoa to the poor soul among us who does not realize this! But even those of us who do realize this, at some time in the past had no clue. But when we believed in Jesus, who came and died on the cross for us and took care of our sin problem, we were freed from guilt, shame, bondage, and fear.

In Paul's letter to the Romans (chapter five) Jesus is presented as the New Adam, the new head of the human race, replacing the historical Adam and undoing everything that Adam did by throwing all humanity into sin and ruin. Jesus came and made us all righteous. And so now, by faith, we can say, "Wow, thank you for doing that for me 2000 years ago. That's when I was made perfect in Jesus – even though I wasn't born yet." We were all there, as members of the human race that Jesus became head of. He became the *new* Adam and the one who now represents us. So, we're good to go with him because of what he did for us.

I have faith and my faith is a valuable thing. It allows me to *engage* with God, but it doesn't *earn* me anything with him. There is nothing for me to earn in exercising my faith. Jesus has taken away all my sins (and everyone else's) and said, "It is finished," when he died on the cross. And so, I live in real freedom. A lot of people believe their act of faith saves them from going to hell, and so they live with a lot of insecurity and worry, asking themselves, "Am I believing enough? Do I believe in the right things? What happens if I quit believing? What if I only believe intellectually (like the demons mentioned by James in his letter), and do not have enough good works resulting from my faith?" That's a whole lot of getting wrapped up in working and earning, all in the name of faith!

So, if we are still trying to bring in the law or trying to believe that our act of faith is the one requirement that pleases God and prevents him from doing something horrible to us in eternity, then we are not treating grace as meaningful. In fact, we're treating it as meaningless! Grace just becomes an empty word. If grace is not "unmerited favor," and we still have to add something to it (law, belief, sincerity, good works, etc.) then those things become the basis for God saving us instead of his love, mercy, and unmerited favor (grace).

He doesn't look at us and says, "Okay folks, are you keeping the law? Are you believing? If you *do* enough or *believe* enough, then I won't do something horrible, like punish you in hell, forever." That is far from what grace really is, which is God saying, "I've done it all for you. Put your complete trust in me and not yourself!" God is not *transactional*. He does not require us to do something in order for us to earn his salvation by grace. It is not one big, huge transaction. Instead, grace is God doing it all for us, and then our faith is simply the proper response for what he has *already* done. There's no merit in it.

However, faith is important. I get accused all the time of saying that it doesn't matter if anyone believes or not. Of course, it matters! If we don't believe how can we ever engage with God and have a relationship with him? We can't! So, in that way, belief is essential. But it is not the one thing left for us to do (after Jesus died for us) to prevent God from sending us to hell, forever. Make no mistake. That is not grace!

Paul's last idea in Galatians Two before he launches into Galatians Three is, **If keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die.** If the law could make us right with God, then Christ died for nothing. What is there for him to die for, if we are good with God on our own merit and effort? The law (nor any other thing we do) can't make us right with God simply because we can't keep it. We can't even believe enough on our own. We all need a savior, and we have one ... in Jesus.

### ***What if we quit believing?***

When people are taught that their faith saves them, (rather than by the grace found in Jesus), it's easy to see why many of them wonder what happens if they quit believing and, perhaps, lose their salvation. They wonder about mentally limited people, *crack babies* who are born with brains that aren't working right, and people who have never heard about Jesus. When people believe that their act of faith is what ultimately saves them from separation from God, instead of believing that they are saved completely and finally by grace in what Jesus did for them on the cross, there is good reason for them to question and doubt many things. This is a life of insecurity that many religious people live, unnecessarily.

Keep in mind it is all the messed up, disadvantaged, deceived, and uninformed people that need to be saved the most! God doesn't just save all the people who are pretty darn good and those who find it easy to turn to Him and believe, just because they had a better childhood or didn't have some chemical imbalance plaguing them. God doesn't pick them out based on their good performance and attitude, and then decide that those most in need of being saved are worthless and unworthy of his time. No, he reaches down to the worst of sinners – even the *chief of all sinners*, Paul, and everybody else.

If God doesn't save the very worst person, then what kind of a savior is he? He would be a God that just saves the *cream of the crop*, and just the people who are strong enough, born in a Christian home, and find it easy to believe and perform. In this kind of salvation (by something they do), they alone get saved because they came around to Christ and the rest of humanity, who are really struggling and have all kinds of messed up, mental, emotional, and physical problems, are passed over – or worse, tormented forever? None of this can be true. A real savior saves them all!

I have a pastor friend who objected to one of my Facebook Posts and sent me a long list of *proof texts* from the Bible as evidence that God will, at some point, give up on most of humanity and torment them in hell, forever. I invited him to get together and talk. I told him, “I'd love to talk about the grace of God, how much he loves us, what salvation is, and go through all the passages you sent me in careful detail.” But, like most people I talk to who object to salvation by *grace* and hang on to their *faith* as the one qualifier with God that exempts them from going to hell, he did not want to talk. However, I left the invitation open.

I have found that some religious people who are steeped in the traditions they have inherited, don't really want to sit down and talk about God, salvation, grace, and the role of faith. They just want to throw around a bunch of *proof texts* they've been



taught and never spend any real, serious time looking into things. What are they afraid of? I think they are afraid of finding out that they *might* be wrong and were misinformed by those they blindly trusted all their lives. But that's OK. It is between them and God, and that's where I leave it. I can only conclude that it's not the right time for them ... not yet anyway. But someday, in this life or eternity, it will be the right time and they will joyfully find out that God was bigger, better, more loving, more gracious, and more successful at saving his world than they ever imagined. It will be a wonderful day and a great relief for them, and they will love their savior all the more!

I have learned not to argue with people or tell them they are wrong, as an act of judgment on them. I leave all that to God, where it belongs. I just say, "Hey, bro, let me tell you how amazing God is. He is a great, wonderful, saving God who rescues, redeems, reconciles, and restores. He's always *for* you and never *against* you, or anyone else. Go ask him to show you who he is. He will! That's what I did."

So, that is the end of Galatians Two. Paul has given a real-life situation in his encounter with Peter, plus a bunch of really good principles to help his readers begin to understand what the Good News is, and what it is not. In Galatians Three which follows, Paul gets down to the real problem of how these believers are giving into the false gospel of needing to obey the law to be right with God. Paul's goal is now to try to convince them to *never go back!*

## 6. Don't Be Fooled (Galatians 3.1-9)

This New Testament book of Galatians is really just a letter Paul wrote to the believers residing in Galatia, which is modern-day Turkey. It's the whole region northeast of the Mediterranean Sea. The seven churches mentioned in the Book of Revelation are all located in Galatia. Many of Paul's letters were written to cities located there, like Ephesus, Philippi, and Colossae. This is where the Eastern church was located, which goes back further in time than the Western Church, it was Greek-speaking, Greek-thinking, and Greek in culture. The Western church was more Latin-oriented in language, culture, and thinking. Western Christianity emerged in Rome and expanded out into the rest of the world, and this is the Christianity that most Christians today are a part of.

The Ukrainians, for example, have many believers in Christ, but they are mostly Greek Orthodox. They came out of the Eastern Orthodox tradition of the church. The Christian church existed in two parts for about a thousand years – as the Eastern vs Western church. But then they split in around 1200 AD over whether the Holy Spirit was sent *just* from Jesus, or whether the Father *and* the Son, together, sent him. That doesn't seem like a very good reason to split and go separate ways, so something tells me there was more to it than that. It's like when people split up, whether it's a marriage or a friendship, and they give you an *official* reason. It's usually not the *real* reason. Sometimes the given

reason is the *last straw* in a series of issues between the two parties. They use this reason to tell people, but there's always more to it. This is probably what happened in the history of the Christian church and why it is still divided today.

### ***Oh, foolish Galatians (3.1)***

Now, here in Galatians Three, things heat up and get very interesting. **Oh, you foolish Galatians! Who has cast an evil spell on you? The meaning of the death of Jesus is just as clear to you as if you had seen a picture of him dying on the cross.** Paul is saying that they, in the past, had so embraced and accepted the Good News message that it was very real to them even though they had not actually witnessed Jesus dying on the cross. Paul is writing this letter around 50 AD, and so most of these believers were not eye-witnesses of the crucifixion. Plus, they all resided in a land quite some distance from where Jesus lived and died twenty years earlier.

They heard and received the Good News message about Jesus, but now they were turning away from it and going back to their former life and previous way of thinking. But this is not really all that surprising. Haven't we all gone back to some kind of foolish or unproductive way of living at some point in our lives? I sure have. So, Paul asks them in dramatic fashion, "Who's put a spell on you?" and then he reminds them how real the Good News was to them at one time in the past: "The meaning of Christ's death was made as clear to you as if you'd seen a picture of his death on the cross."

Then Paul goes on and gets down to business with them. **I have one question for you. Did you receive the Holy Spirit by obeying the law?** Here's the bottom line, folks. He wants to ask them just one question. Answer this and it will settle the issue.

“Did you receive the Holy Spirit by obeying the law? Huh?” Did they receive the Spirit by obeying the Law of Moses? Of course not. That's not how anyone ever receives the Spirit sent by God and promised by Jesus. At one time we may have *tried* to keep the law – and we may have kept some of it – but that didn't really accomplish anything for us. Keeping the law, even partially, never brings God's Spirit into our lives. Instead, we received the Spirit, God's Spirit, that same one that Christ promised to send because we believed the Good News message that we heard about Jesus. The spirit becomes real in our life – that one already sent – by believing the Good News message about Jesus. Doing this opens up a whole new world for us.

Now, again, our belief doesn't earn us anything. It can't. It is just our proper and humble response to what God has *already* done *for* us. God didn't say, “Oh, okay, you believe in me? Good. Then I'll come and visit you in my Spirit.” No, he's already there. He indwells everyone. He's omnipresent (everywhere present). God can't help it because it is his nature as a spiritual being, and as the Creator of the universe, he must be everywhere all the time. What happens is that when we believe, we open ourselves up to God. Right? Many people, worldwide now and in history, have experienced this. They have opened themselves up and said, “God, I want to know you.” So, they received the Holy Spirit that's already there in their life, but now they're consciously experiencing him. That didn't come by keeping the law. It couldn't. We can keep the law all we want, but that won't open us up to the Spirit. It's when we say, “God, I trust you, not myself.” Only then are our minds and hearts renewed, and we're able to receive him, have fellowship with him, and communicate with him daily as our best and closest friend. Faith is a wonderful thing to experience, but there's no *earning* in it.

We believe in what Jesus did, but it wasn't our act of believing that earned us anything with God. Our act of belief does,

however, get us into a right, correct, and active relationship with God. How else could we (or anyone else) ever have any relationship with God unless we believe in him and say, “Oh God, you’re there! I believe.” Only then can anyone even start engaging with him. This is why faith is so important. But if people don't believe – and a lot of people don't – they don't engage with God, at least not that they are aware of even though he *always* engages with them and constantly draws them to himself.

When they don't believe in God they're missing out on so much – a relationship with their very own Creator. What a shame. What a loss. What an empty life, chasing after one thing after another and never *really* being satisfied and fulfilled. But that doesn't mean God's going to do something horrific to them in eternity for not believing. He's never going to give up on anybody. He has a goal of saving his world because he loves all people. So, he is coming after them, including all unbelievers, not to retaliate against them for not believing, but to work within them so they will eventually see his unconditional love, believe, turn to him, and finally rest in him!

Many religious people believe God is coming after unbelievers to condemn them forever in hell. Well, it's true that he's coming after them, but it's only to save them and he's not giving up until he does. God will win in eternity because love wins in the end. We know that love wins because it's powerful – the most powerful force in the universe and beyond. Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians that “love never fails.”

### ***Perfected by human effort (3.3)***

Paul furthers his questioning. **After starting your Christian lives in the Spirit, how foolish can you become? Why are you now trying to perfect yourselves by your own human effort? You’ve experienced so much. Was it all for nothing? Surely**

**it was not in vain, was it?** He's really sticking it to them. He's basically saying, "You know how you started. You know what happened to you. You know what you experienced. And now, suddenly, you're acting like you're under a spell. Do you really want to go back to the nonsense that never could bring you into a better spiritual place of freedom and peace? Why would you do this?" Well, it's because they have a weak, fallen nature that can take over their lives. All of us today are just as weak and fallen.

I once had a friend that I'd known for a long time. He was married for 30 years, and he was going to leave his wife for a younger woman. When we are not the ones caught up in such foolishness, we can't help but ask, "Why would you give up everything – your wife, your kids, your home and go live in a motel with some other woman for a fleeting moment that's not going to last – especially when you got where you are today through a wonderful relationship in marriage, and with God, for over three decades?" It makes no sense to us when we're on the outside looking in. But this could easily be any one of us in other situations where we're the ones caught up in sin. We can easily be blinded by the temporary thrill and invigoration that comes from escaping some situation in life that we don't like. The Bible refers to this as, "The pleasure of sin for a season." But, make no mistake, there are always consequences, even if we don't foresee them. For my friend, that day of realization came, and by the time he realized he had made a bad decision, neither woman (the new one, nor his wife) wanted to be with him. Turned out his wife forgave him, and they got back together. But things may never be quite the same. However, things *can* become better and better by the grace of God as he rebuilds his wife's trust in him, which was so quickly lost.

This illustrates what Paul is asking this group of people in Galatia. Why would they give up so much to gain so little – especially when it is a matter of going back to something much worse in their life: legalism, requirements, bondage, worry, stress,

fear, guilt, shame, and a sense of constant failure living under the cruelty of the law? They probably went back under the law and did not fully realize it. Old habits and lifestyles are hard to shake and easy to fall back into. We can unknowingly, slowly slip back into them after the newness of our new-found life wears off. This is why Paul asked them if they had been “bewitched,” or mesmerized in some way. I think we have all experienced this to some degree in our lives.

Perhaps, in their mind, they were “walking in the Spirit,” but in reality, they were trying not to sin by keeping the overwhelmingly burdensome law. They may have thought, “I’m going to prove to God that I’m a true believer.” This is often what happens when people focus on their sins instead of the solution. Paul describes this in his letter to the Romans like this, “Consider yourself dead to sin.” He did not say, “You no longer sin,” or, “You have never sinned.” He seemed to be saying, “Look and see yourself as *dead* (inactive) to sin because you’re now alive in the Spirit. Carry on in that solution of walking with God and all that he is, and the sin stuff will take care of itself.” Over time, you won’t become *sinless*, but you will *sin less!*

Do you see this in your own life, that from time to time you think, “I gotta really bring it for God. I gotta do more Bible study. I gotta go to church more. I gotta help other people. I gotta ... I gotta... I gotta...” Those are all good things, but they aren’t requirements by God. He doesn’t require you to go to church. You don’t have to go. If you want to go, then go and enjoy it. But you don’t have to. You won’t be in trouble with God, and you won’t necessarily be sinning. Who knows, you may very well have the most productive and sincere spiritual life *outside* of organized church! Probably the worst thing you can do is go to church out of guilt and a sense of obligation, or out of fear. Sometimes people are told (directly or subtly), “You better attend church, somewhere, or something bad will happen to you – in this life or the one to come.” That’s a totally wrong reason to go.

## ***Sinless or sin less***

I had a friend tell me that walking with God was not about sinning less because when looking at the fullness of what Christ did on the cross, her sin-consciousness had disappeared. She didn't even think about sin, which only brought back that human dilemma of judging what sin is, and what it isn't. This is a very good point she made because even the slightest thing could be considered a "sin" when realizing that sin is *missing the mark* to any degree. That puts us right back dwelling on our sin again and losing focus on the solution. We "miss the mark" (that's what the word sin means in Greek) all the time.

But for most people, it helps them to realize they can't be *sinless* in this life, but that they can *sin less!* This is an important distinction. This is because everyone experiences sin, even though they're walking with God and trusting him. So, I try to encourage people and say, "Okay, you're not sinless and you're never going to be sinless in this life, but now you are in Christ – that's how God sees you. So, in that way, you have no sin, even though in reality, you're doing many things that are not right. You will have thoughts that aren't right. You're going to get mad at someone. You're going to get jealous and experience all kinds of selfishness. But you will also find, if you're walking with God, seeking him, and enjoying a relationship with him, that you don't sin as much as you used to. This makes sense because God is now an active part of your life. When we focus on our relationship with God, sin tends to take care of itself.

When you focus on God and his solution in Jesus, and not on your sin, you will also find yourself making better decisions in your life. When we realize we are living in Christ, we're more mindful that God's Spirit is right there guiding us, all the time, and we are aware of it. There is no better, peaceful, joyous life of



freedom than this. If we're focused on sin, how much we're sinning, and what we shouldn't do, this might get you a little way down the road of success and you'll do a little better. But eventually, it's going to wear you out and you're going to give into sin more because you'll become weakened. But when you walk with God, you get strength, and you do a lot better. That's why Paul said, "Consider yourself dead to sin!"

Another friend shared with me what he learned about the flaw in making church his main focus. He had been to at least 25 churches. He was visiting a lot of "buildings" because he was single. And in every church he attended – most of them Latino churches – the main focus was on sin. That was always the big elephant in the room. He discovered that the more he was prompted to focus on sin, the more he sinned. But then, because of this experience, he realized he couldn't help focusing on *something* in life, and if it was not God and Christ then the default was his own sin and shortcomings. The good thing in all of this is that it led him to the Good News message about Jesus and all that he did for him. Now, sin is for him like a dirty shirt to be taken off and replaced with a fresh new one – which is a new awareness of who God is, what he has done for him, and basking in this realization. All this becomes part of us when sin is no longer our main focus or our main struggle.

Keep in mind, this focusing on sin is often the way religious people control others who are already ridden with guilt and shame. Those things in us can get exploited. It's a bad trade when we exchange an effortless life of worshipping God 24/7 and walking daily with him, for trying to *appease* God through rituals, church attendance, formal prayers, and getting convicted (for not living up) by well-intended preachers who only increase our burden with a sense of failure. It's a bad trade if that's what we're doing. This is not what always happens, but keep in mind that it *can* and *does* happen, often, in the lives of religious people.

However, it's possible to go to church and walk with God in the freedom of knowing the Good News about Jesus, and at the same time, not be taken advantage of by well-intentioned people who want to place you back under the law. It's a matter of what your mindset is when you attend church. I tell people that I'm worshiping *before* I go into a worship service; I am free to worship God *during* that meeting, and then *afterward*, when I leave, I'm still worshiping. It's my lifestyle. I'm not bragging, I'm just saying that it's how I live. Sure, I fall away at times, I think things I shouldn't, I get angry, and I experience other things that are not best. But I snap out of it quicker when I'm walking with God, and he reminds me when it happens. It's kind of a rescue operation on his part. I am always thankful, and I always conclude, "Thank you, God. I don't want to live like that or be that kind of person."

So, that's what Paul's saying here as he opens in Galatians Three. "What happened to you people? Why do you want to start with one very good way of living and then go back to what didn't work? For what reason?" We all get drawn back into wrong thinking, occasionally, because we get fooled just like they did. When it happens, just dust yourself off and start walking with God, again. It takes only a moment and a humble heart!

### ***I ask you again (3.5)***

Then Paul says in verse five, **I want to ask you again, did God give you the Holy Spirit and work miracles among you because you've obeyed the law?** Obviously, obeying the law and trying harder is not the way God gives his Spirit to indwell people. So, Paul answers his own question with, **Of course not! You received the Spirit because you believed the Good News message about Christ.** And even this is not a matter of God saying, "Okay, finally you believe. Now, I'll give you my

Spirit.” Our faith only enables us to open up and experience the Spirit who has already been sent and dwells in everyone. The Holy Spirit is not a reward we get for believing. Believing is what we must do to receive and experience the Spirit who is already there, waiting for us to respond. God is always very proactive!

Once we receive the Spirit, God can work in us because we now allow it. Before, we were preventing it. We were *thwarting* and *grieving* the Spirit (as Paul describes it in one of his other letters). It’s not that we’re keeping God from succeeding, but we are setting up a resistance against him. But someday, we will all realize who he is and will eventually respond to his irresistible love. Till then God just says, “You want to do it your way? Go ahead, do it the hard way. Do it the long way. It’s the only way you will learn and *never go back*. But I’m going to win in the end because I love you. So, if you want to do this the long and hard way, we can. Or you can just walk with me now, worship me all day long, pray without ceasing as an *instinctive life* with me, and experience a life of peace and fulfillment. Your choice. But eventually, I will win because I love you and will never, ever leave or forsake you!”

### ***Considered as righteous (3.6)***

Paul brings up an illustration to support all he has been asking about their foolish decision to go back and live under law, requirements, and the stress of trying to keep them. **In the same way, Abraham believed God, and God considered him to be righteous because of his faith.** And that’s true. As soon as anyone believes, God sees them coming into an active relationship with him. Again, they don’t earn anything, but God sees the righteousness in us that *he* brings about because we’re in Christ and we are now living in him. So, we are counted, seen, reckoned, considered, and evaluated by God as being righteous – that is, being in a *right relationship* with him.

It goes back to changing the way we think by “the renewing of our mind,” which Paul referred to in his letter to the Romans (chapter twelve). It's right thinking, new thinking, a new life with new actions. But it is not *earning* anything with God. We're not impressing God by keeping some law, reading the Bible, going to church, or anything else. It is, instead, walking with God, trusting him, and having faith in the Good News about Jesus. That's what pleases God, and he's pleased because of all *we* get out of it. It's not for his benefit that we believe, but ours!

As an example, Paul mentions Abraham, who was known as the *father of faith*, and that he believed in God. When he did, God could only conclude, “I consider Abraham (or anyone) who believes in me to be righteous, or in a right relationship with me.” Paul applies this illustration about Abraham to everyone who believes when he continues and writes, **The real children of Abraham are those who put trust in God.** Believers are the ultimate children of Abraham because they follow in his footsteps of faith. It is those who believe, not those who try to obey the impossible-to-keep law, that are real children of Abraham.

However, God loves everyone equally. He has to, because he is God, and he is *love*. But those who, experientially, walk with God and exercise faith in him are his *closest* children (not his *only* children) because they choose to believe and place themselves in a state of mind and heart where they can freely engage with God as their loving Creator. How else could anyone experience God at all, if they do not believe in him? It's impossible! But he loves everyone – his whole world equally, even those who don't believe! These other people (unbelievers) are also his “children,” but they're out of fellowship with him, However, he wants them to engage with him fully, and someday they will. Paul wrote in both his letter to the Ephesians and to the Colossians that God will, eventually, “reconcile all things (and people) to himself, everything (everyone) in heaven and on earth.” That's very

complete and it's exactly what we would expect from a God who created and loves his world.

### ***Righteous because of faith (3.8)***

**What's even more important is that the Scriptures** (that is, the Old Testament writings) **looked forward to when God would declare the Gentiles to be just as righteous as us, based on their faith.** See, it's all about faith and all about what God does. It's not about the law or what little we do. **God proclaimed the Good News to Abraham a long time ago when he told him 'all nations will be blessed through you.'** Ok, there it is, there's the Good News way back at the time of Abraham, long before Jesus came. God's going to do it. He's going to save the world, all nations, blessing them through Abraham ... but actually it was through Jesus who would come much later than Abraham. Paul will address this in more detail later in this letter. God is going to bless all the nations, everyone, and the whole human race in Christ and no longer allow failure and sin to reign.

So now Paul draws another conclusion that applies to all of us today. **All who put their faith in Christ will experience the same blessing that Abraham received when he believed.** Again, faith is really important, but it doesn't earn us anything with God. Any earning is done by Jesus, *for* us, on the cross. Faith doesn't *merit* us anything, but it does *gain* us something. It gains for us a wonderful relationship with God that's active, alive, and well, and we benefit from it. People who are without faith can't enjoy a relationship with God, their very own Creator. But he loves them just as much as believers, and they're just as saved (delivered) in Christ as anyone else because

God is the one who does the saving. True, they don't experience the salvation that they have. Their minds haven't been renewed. They're not walking in the Spirit. They're not benefiting from it at this time in their lives. But none of these things earn us any elevated status with God. All our good standing with him comes from Jesus and what he did for us by grace. However, someday, all unbelievers will experience all these good things in **their** relationship with God. He will see to it. How could he not? He knows what he sent his son to this earth to do, and he will not fail. What needs to change isn't God, it's us. We don't change to get God to like us, we change so that we can engage with God and enjoy our fellowship with him, in his love, in an experiential way.

## 7. Rescued from a Curse (Galatians 3.10-18)

### *Those who depend on the law (3.10)*

Now, Paul sets up a big contrast to all he has just said. **But those who depend on keeping the law to make themselves right with God are under His curse.** That is, they are under God's declaration, "You're not in the right situation, you're not oriented correctly, and you're living in a way that is unacceptable to me. I have something better in mind for you!" Paul then quotes the Old Testament to support his claim. **The scriptures say, 'cursed is everyone who does not obey all the commands that are written in God's book of the law.'** And that's true, from a practical point of view. If we don't do the many good things that the law describes, it's because we're not walking with God. When we walk with God, we instinctively do what's right. But the problem is that we cannot keep any law perfectly, nor consistently do what is right. We need not try to *appease* God or *earn* something from Him. We can't. But we can seek him and walk with Him, and when we do, we will instinctively do the things that the law commands. The law presents good things: don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't covet, don't do all those things that will destroy your life! So, "*cursed* is everyone who does not observe and obey the commandments that are written in God's book of the law." Their life will be loaded with

problems! It will be like living under a curse. Actually, it is. Living under the curse of sin is living with the curse that sin brings. God sent his son to free us from this curse.

But the only way we can get to where we perform those good things in the law, observe them, and experience them is not by trying to do them in our own strength and will but by walking with God and having it become an *instinctive* life experience that comes out of our relationship with him. There is no other way. I have on my business card, *religion divides – relationships unite*. There's a lot of truth to this and that's the kind of distinction Paul is making here.

So, Paul then concludes, **It's clear that no one can ever be made right with God by trying to keep the law.** You're not going to do it. You can try, and you might do a couple of things a little better for a while, but you're not going to be *made right* with God by trying to keep the law. This is because your focus will be on keeping the law (which you can't do) instead of on your relationship with God (which you can do). It is the only real solution. All other solutions are based on ourselves, and they are illusions!

### ***Life through faith (3.11b)***

Paul now grabs a passage from one of the Old Testament prophets to help make his point. **The scriptures say that it is through a person's faith that they are righteous and have life.** He also quotes this same passage in the introduction of his letter to the Romans, where he wrote, "The righteous shall live by faith." This is a quote from the Prophet Habakkuk, and it is true that it is only through faith (that is, being viewed as being in a *right relationship* with God) that a person has, and experiences life. Paul is not saying that by having faith you'll earn everlasting life and



not go to hell! Unfortunately, that is how many religious people interpret this passage. Now, they have every right to do so, but at face value, that is not what it says. Nothing about hell or retaliation by God is mentioned or even implied (unless someone puts it there!)

But through faith, we will have *life* in Christ. Real life, real living, real enjoyment, real freedom, real peace, not just the superficial kind. I have a friend who says, “People are like toothpaste. Squeeze them ... and watch what comes out.” When people get under pressure, who and what they are really comes out. It’s very hard to hide it, unlike when things are going well in life. Either the love of God comes out, and they love God all the more, trust Him more, and love others more, or all kinds of mean-spirited and self-destructive nonsense comes out, and they start taking it out on other people around them.

Now, in verse twelve, Paul contrasts the *way* of faith and the *way* of law. **These are really two very different ways of life! The life of faith is very different from the life of trying to obey the law to gain life.** Think about it. If you try to obey the law, focus on your sin, and then discover you can't do what's right, you get caught in a vicious cycle that will never bring you real life and real living. It never can. In fact, it will bring you death – spiritual death. That's the worst kind of death! But in a faith relationship with God, you're saying, “Hey God, you did it all. You took care of my sin. You took away the sin of the world. You made me clean. Now I can enjoy my relationship with you!” That's real life – enjoying peace and freedom. Big contrast. That's why Paul was asking, “How did you leave that wonderful life and go back under the law that doesn't work? What spell are you under?”

### ***Christ has rescued us (3.13)***

To complete this part of his letter, Paul starts with “but...” so that no one can miss the essential contrast that he is about to present. In verse thirteen he goes on and says, **But Christ has rescued us from the curse imposed on us by the law. When He hung on the cross, He took on Himself the curse of our wrongdoing.** Oh, what a good deal he has given us! **For it's written in the Scriptures** (that is, the Old Testament writings), **‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.’ It is through Christ Jesus that God blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing He promised Abraham, Therefore, those of us who believe receive the promised Holy Spirit through our faith.**

What a contrast. This is Paul's repeated theme throughout his letter. Galatians is a terrific presentation of what the Good News is, and what it isn't! Anything other than an understanding of God's salvation *by grace, through* faith (see Paul's letter to the Ephesians for more about this), and not keeping the law – and not even substituting your faith as the one thing that God requires – anything other than the one and only Good News message about Jesus is bankrupt in solving our problem of sin and failure in this life.

Grace has to be 100% grace, or it's not grace at all! If it's 99% grace and 1% law (or requirements, or whatever), it's no longer grace. Grace is “unmerited favor” from God, and as soon as we add anything as an item of merit (even our faith) then it is no longer grace. If we ever gain a clear understanding of this, oh the freedom, joy, and peace in store for us is unbelievable! It's so good. I get told all the time that it's “just too good to be true.” They claim it can't be that good of a deal, completely free, paid for, and delivered into our lives by the Spirit of God. But I always tell them, “If it's that good, it can only be from God!” He's the only one that can make it that good. And he does. He's that big. How could he be anything less and still be God? He really is that

successful. There is nothing in God that requires him to partly succeed. When he saves, he never has to say, “Well, I gave it the *good old college try* and only a small percent of humanity came around, believed, and got saved. Oh well!”

No, God *first* saves his world, and *then* he reveals the Good News about what he accomplished in Jesus so that people can *hear* it, and then *believe* what they’ve heard about what was *already* done for them. People don't believe in order to get saved; they're saved in order to believe. Don't get it backward.

Once again (and I cannot emphasize this enough), receiving the Holy Spirit through faith isn't a reward or something we earn. It is God's free gift to us. God doesn't say, “Hey, if you believe, I'll bless you with the Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit is already in everybody. He must be because the Holy Spirit is present everywhere. How could he not be? He is already dwelling in everyone, but not everyone has an *active* relationship with him. It takes two persons to have a relationship. So, when someone believes, they receive (in their heart and mind) the Holy Spirit that's already in them. They have, for the first time, opened up communication with him. Now they can “walk in the Spirit and not fulfill the desires of the flesh,” as Paul described it in another one of his letters. He also wrote in his letter to the Romans that, “The Spirit will bear witness with our Spirit that we belong to him!” So, we have all these wonderful engaging things going on when we believe in God.

But remember, our act of faith doesn't earn us anything with God. It can't. Our faith just gets us actively engaged with God and if we choose not to believe, or if we can't believe, God just says, “OK, you want to wait? We can wait. But I can out-wait you. You've got more to learn first. That's fine. I'll keep working.” He's not going to throw anybody away or discard people like an old, soiled garment just because they don't get on board soon enough or believe enough. A lot of people go through horrible things in

life – the way they're raised and the things they experience – and they don't hear about God. Many people are taught to be atheists. They don't even know what they're doing. For God to just save the people who find it easy to believe, or those who were taught it all their lives and were not abused as children, etc., and then throw away everybody else. This renders God to be not much of a savior at all if he saves only the easy cases, the *cream of the crop*. If he is a real savior, he's got to save the very worst people, save them from themselves, and save them from their sin.

He's got to save everyone. He's got to seek out the most desperate of all people. "He came to seek and to save those who are lost," wrote John. That would be everyone. Does there come a point where God gives up and decides that it's no longer worth his effort? He's got to save the worst sinner, the most desperate person, the most ignorant and most fallen person in the whole world in order for him to be the *Savior of the World* (as John called him).

### ***Example from everyday life (3.15)***

In verse 15 Paul writes, **Dear brothers and sisters, here is an example from everyday life. No one can set aside or even amend an Irrevocable agreement. In other words, once a legal agreement is made, it cannot be revoked, taken away, undone, set aside, or even amended. It is binding. And so it is in the case of God giving the promise to Abraham and his child.** Now, the word *child* here is actually the word *seed* in the original Greek text. But many translations use child, offspring, or descendent because it's easier for most people to understand.

Paul continues on to explain, **Notice that scripture doesn't say 'to his children' (plural), as if it meant multiple descendants. Instead, it says 'to his child' (singular). And that**

**can only mean Christ.** So, when God gave his promise to Abraham and his *seed* (his offspring, or his descendant), it was really to Abraham and his one single descendant, Christ, who would eventually come as the Messiah. The distinction Paul is making is clear. It wasn't a promise to *just* Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and on down the family line (all his descendants). The promise really jumps all the way down his lineage to his ultimate descendant, Jesus! The descendant of Abraham that really counts is Jesus Christ, who came many years later.

**This is what I'm trying to say.** Okay, thanks, Paul. What are you trying to say? Give us a little more explanation. **The agreement God made with Abraham couldn't be canceled 430 years later when God gave the law to Moses.** Okay, this is really important. Just because God gave a set of laws doesn't change the fact that God first made a promise through Abraham long before the law was given. Once God makes a promise, he's got to keep it despite anything else he causes or allows to happen later on. Maybe the law came out of the mind and heart of man, and they imposed it on God! Maybe the Jews were trying to "appease the gods?" So, perhaps God was saying, "You want law? Do you think you can make yourself perfect by keeping a bunch of rules? OK, we'll run that experiment, and you will only find out that you need me!"

But no matter how the law came about . . . it came to the Jews just the same. However, it came *after* God had already made a promise to Abraham about a coming Messiah that would do something to bless all nations – all humanity. That's great! So, the agreement God made with Abraham could not be canceled 430 years later when the law to Moses was given. Therefore, Paul concludes, **God would be breaking his promise.** If the law came along and canceled God's promise, then it's a broken promise. When God makes a promise, it's going to happen.

### ***A promised inheritance (3.18)***

So, Paul continues, **If the inheritance could be received by keeping the law, then it would not be the result of accepting God's promise. But God graciously gave an inheritance to Abraham just as he had promised.** All he's saying is that God gave a promise to Abraham and to all his descendants (actually to Jesus, who was his ultimate descendent), and when the law came along 430 years later with rules and regulations, God's promise still remained. Now, sure, people were supposed to obey the law, but doing so (actually *trying* to do so) didn't change the promise that God gave through Abraham – that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through his seed, and that would be Christ who would eventually come to this earth, die on a cross, and take away the sin of the world. This is God's real solution!

## 8. Why The Law? (Galatians 3.19-22)

### *Why was the law given? (3.19a)*

Next, Paul asks a really good and logical question. **Why, then, was the law given at all?** I like the way Paul always asks the questions every reader is naturally going to ask. His writings are usually very logical. His answer to this question is key. **It was given parallel to the promise in order to show people their sins.** Okay, the promise didn't go away. It's still there, but God brings in law as an *extra* thing, not as a replacement. God was not replacing the promise, he was showing people their sin and their need for a savior. That's all the law does. It says, "Here's what's wrong, here's what's right, and you're not doing it. Maybe you can keep a few laws on your own, but you're mostly breaking them."

It was James in his New Testament letter who wrote, "If you break one law, you've really broken all of them." We either keep the law or we break it. If we break any part of it (don't keep it) then we are lawbreakers and fall short of perfection. Duh! No brainer. But God's goal is not just to put us down and make us feel bad. He wants us to know that we need him and that he has provided *the* solution in Jesus on the cross! This was the purpose of the law.

The law, by the fact that we can't keep it, says, "You're a sinner and you'll never be righteous or pure by trying to keep the

law.” That’s because we can’t keep it, no matter how hard we try! God is just letting us know where we stand before him so we can seek the hope that is found in him alone. Something else (besides keeping the law) has to happen, and that's what the *promise* is all about – making us right in Christ without keeping the law because we could never do it! This is why Paul said, “The law was given alongside the promise to show people their sins.”

Then Paul continues, **The law was intended to last only until the coming of the promised child.** So, the law was only there, temporarily, until the promised messiah (Jesus) would come and end the law by fulfilling it. When the law ends, we don't need it anymore because Jesus fulfilled the requirement of the law *for* us. What a deal! Jesus didn't *do away* with the law, he *fulfilled* it. Paul explains this in detail in his letter to the Romans.

Whatever requirement there was in the law, Jesus came along and said, “I've taken care of that.” So, in that way, the law has been done away (actually, fulfilled) and is no longer binding on us. That’s because God's original promise to Abraham never ends, having been completed in Jesus who came as the promised Messiah. That promise will exist forever in the person of Jesus who was raised from the dead. He took care of sin, for us, once and for all. Finished, done, completed, just as Jesus said in his final words on the cross, “It is finished.”

But what was finished? It was *everything* he came to do to fulfill God’s promise to Abraham and bless all the nations of the earth. We still have that promise today. We’ll always have the promise, and the law didn't do away with it, nor did our failure to obey the law do away with it. Christ came along and said, “I'll take care of this law thing for you,” and so we are now free.”

### ***Mediator between God and people (3.19b)***



Paul goes on to tell us more about how the law was given by God. **God gave the law through angels to Moses, who acted as a mediator between God and people.** That's interesting because I don't remember in the Old Testament anything about angels giving the law to Moses. But that's Paul's claim – that God gave his law *through* angels to Moses, who was acting as a mediator between God and the people. So, the mediation chain is God, the angels, Moses, and then the people. That's quite a chain. It is also interesting that Paul, in one of his other letters, describes Jesus as playing the same role of mediator, except without angels involved. He wrote, "There is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ." Paul is always a monotheist in his letters and always contrasts Jesus in some way to God. His writings are never very supportive of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Nicene council view of God existing in three *equal* persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are each by themselves, fully God. The New Testament never uses such wording as, "God the Son," or "God the Holy Spirit." It only uses, "God the Father."

Another typical passage by Paul, that has him distinguishing Jesus from God the Father in a more subordinate role, is this one: "There is *one* God the Father, and *one* lord Jesus Christ." But all such passages are subject to interpretation, which everyone is entitled to. In the case of the 4<sup>th</sup>-century church leaders, they battled over this trinity view of God for about 60 years. Power, control, and influence went back and forth as the church made the huge mistake of mixing religion with politics. As expected, one side emerged victorious, imposing their view on everyone through the awesome power of the State. It was in AD 381 that this trinity view of God was officially established in the church, and it has been held by the majority of Christians ever since.

But in the passage by Paul, where Jesus is identified as a mediator between God and man, Jesus is seen as more directly accessing God to administer grace, more than Moses was in administering the law. No angels were involved in the mediating

work of Jesus. The implication is that Jesus has the right and authority to approach God the Father fully and directly because he is the *only begotten* son of God. The Author of Hebrews also compares Jesus to Moses in the opening chapters of his letter. Check this out sometime!

### ***A mediator is helpful (3.20)***

Paul then goes on to talk about how mediation works. **A mediator is helpful when multiple parties need to reach an agreement. But since there is only one God, he did not need to use a mediator when he gave his promise to Abraham.** Okay. Here is yet another distinction between the promise given through Abraham for the whole world, and the law given through Moses for the nation of Israel. God gave the promise *directly* to Abraham (and his descendants – but more specifically to one descendent, Jesus who would come much later in time). God did not use any mediator in making his promise to Abraham. However, there was a mediator of that promise, in the person of Jesus when he came and died on the cross to “take away the sin of the world!”

But Paul makes it clear that God is effectively saying, “I’m going to talk directly to Abraham. I’m going to give him the promise, and not through a mediator. It’s not through angels. It’s not through Moses. This is from me to you, Abraham, and to your seed ... to Christ who will come.” So, the promise came to Abraham and directly to Christ for us.

### ***Is there a conflict? (3.21)***

Then, in typical Paul fashion, he asks another good question. **Is there a conflict between God's law and God's promise?**

Paul does not hesitate to answer. **No, absolutely not.** But this is a logical question. It's easy to think, "Gee, there must be a conflict between God's wonderful promise and the harsh Law." But Paul already established that the promise came first, then the law came along which, in turn, ended when Christ came. None of us could ever keep the law perfectly, so it could never be any kind of real solution. It was just given to demonstrate that we're all sinners and need Christ, the Messiah, mediator, and savior that would someday come ... Jesus! So, Paul already established that the grand promise about Jesus had been given, then followed by the law 430 years later, and then it all ended when Jesus came along and fulfilled both the promise and the law. He fulfilled the promise by fulfilling the law (keeping it fully) for us, in our place. What a deal!

In one of Paul's other letters he says, "The law tutors us to Christ." It *tutors* us into the reality that we could never fully obey the law and be perfect. So, it ends up as a vehicle to show us that we're sinners and in need of Jesus. When we read that stuffy, negative, depressing old law, it should act as a *tutor* to point us to Jesus and what he did on the cross. But we still have people going around today saying we've got to keep some kind of law in order to earn some sort of favor from God. But grace is *unmerited favor*. That's the beauty of it. That takes a big burden off all of us if we will let it. And so, Paul rightly asked, "Is there a conflict between God's law and God's promise?" only to quickly answer, "Absolutely not."

Then Paul adds this information, **If the law could give people new life, then they could be made right with God by obeying it.** If anybody ever did actually keep the whole law perfectly, they would be a perfect being, and they would *earn* new life. Well ... that's what Jesus did. He lived a perfect life, kept the law, fulfilled it *for* us, and then died on the cross and said, "I'm dying *with* you, *for* you, and even *as* you! Therefore, all of the merit

of being right with God is going to come as a result of what I'm doing because I'm doing it *for* you, in your place. I love you that much!" This is such Good News. This is why Paul starts his letter saying, "Cursed is anyone who brings a different Good News..." and then spends the whole rest of the letter telling people what that Good News is and is not.

### ***We're all prisoners of sin (3.22)***

In support of all he just said, Paul brings this additional statement of clarification. **Scriptures** (the Old Testament writings) **make it clear that we are all prisoners of sin. Therefore, we can only receive God's promise of freedom by believing in Jesus Christ.** Notice that we *receive* it. We experience it. We take it in. We say, "I'm on board with this. I accept the Good News message, and I agree with it." This is what believing and faith are all about. It's not how we start earning anything with God. Everything that needs to be done has already been done, for us, in Christ on the cross. It's already been applied to us as human beings because everything that Jesus did, he did for all humanity as "Savior of the World." What changes is our *minds*, and then in our hearts, we say, "Oh God, I accept what you already did for me 2000 years ago. Thank you."

We need not say, "Hey God, I'm believing. Will you now apply what you did 2000 years ago and make it valid?" Can you see the difference? One is salvation by *faith* (you gotta believe to prevent God from doing something horrible to you in eternity). The other is salvation by *grace*, and it's through faith that we experience it. It is not through faith that we *earn* it! This is the big difference that Paul is talking about in this letter and in all his letters. It's consistent throughout the New Testament. But there are many people who really believe that when they respond to God in faith, it makes God say, "Okay, finally you believe. Now

I won't have to do anything bad to you. I won't have to send you to hell forever." That's the law speaking, not God. That's earning. The other way, the Good News way, is that God took care of it all and saved all of humanity.

God sends out the Good News message and says, "Here's my Good News. I've taken care of everything that needs to be done for you. I'm telling you this so you can hear it, believe it, and engage with me in a wonderful, personal relationship. Okay? If you don't receive this Good News message, then you'll miss out until you come around. And you will come around, eventually. I'll see to it because this is what I sent my son into the world to accomplish. I sent him to save you, not to condemn you. He will not fail." If some people have to take their whole life to come around or spend time in eternity still figuring it out, it is still God who does the successful work in them because he's the only one who can! I personally don't believe God *will*, or ever *can*, give up on anyone. Even if it takes time in eternity to change, correct, redeem, restore, and reconcile everyone, that is his clear goal, his only goal, his ultimate goal! That's just who he is, a God who is love and a God who saves!

However, there are a lot of different views out there on all of this, and I'm flexible about them. I'm not dogmatic, and I respect the honest views of others. I do not call other people who disagree *heretics* or *false teachers*, or even "wrong." I just say, "This is what I believe, and here's why." Then I am always ready to have a productive, mutually respectful, patient conversation about it. I only wish the sentiment coming from the other direction was the same. But that's OK. I try to love people, unconditionally, as God loves me!

For me, the key is whether salvation is completely by grace – something God does for us – or whether we have the tiniest part of earning in it. If we do even just one-tenth of one percent, and God does the other 99.9 percent, it's still not grace. It's still works and law-keeping if God doesn't do it all. But that's the beauty of

grace. He *did* do it all! There's no reason why he couldn't, therefore he did. That takes the burden off us of trying to earn something with God – be it something we do or believe. So now we only need to say, “Thank you. Thank you, God. I believe. I want to have a relationship with you. I want to know you. I want to walk with you daily. I want to *sin less*, even though I can't be *sinless*. I want to live in peace, joy, and freedom and you alone have made this possible.”

Consider this. If Jesus took our sins “as far as the east is from the west” then how many sins do we have when he sees us? He sees us without spot and without blemish. We don't see this when we look in the mirror. Fortunately, God sees us differently than we see ourselves. God is not looking at us the way that we look at ourselves. We should be seeing ourselves in Christ, just as God does, but it's hard. What is good to know is that this is how God sees us, and that's what really counts! It's very easy for us to get down on ourselves when we are distracted by the things out there in the world around us. Everything out there distracts us from the joy and peace we're supposed to have in knowing the Good News about who Jesus is. Be careful. Always focus on what God has done for you by grace!

## 9. A Temporary Guardian (Galatians 3.23-29)

### *Before the way of faith (3.23)*

Now that Paul is done explaining how God's promise and his law work together for the same purpose in very different ways, he goes on to explain more about how our faith plays out in all of this. **Before faith in Christ was available, people were kept in a kind of protective custody until the way of faith was revealed.** And this is true. The kind of wonderful faith that benefits us so greatly is a result of us hearing and accepting the Good News message about Jesus. This kind of faith wasn't available nor experienced when people lived under the harsh law. They had no knowledge of how God would save humanity through Jesus. Even though they had read the account of God's promise to Abraham in the Old Testament, it was hard for them to figure it out with all the harsh influence they lived under the law. It took the coming of Jesus, his teaching, who he was, what he did, how he lived, his death and resurrection, and his example of love to give people the reason and zeal to believe.

Now it's not that they were under a better deal while living under the law before they gained their faith. Instead, they were under a *temporary custodianship*, if you will, that helped them somewhat but was far inferior to the life of faith that God had

planned for all humanity from the beginning. It might be easy to think that this Old Testament Law has nothing to do with us, today. In some ways, it doesn't. That set of laws was given to the Jews, but the moral parts of it apply to all humanity because sin is universal among all people. As Paul wrote in Romans Three, "All have sinned and fall short of God's perfection."

But this whole idea of being "under the law" in many ways applies to us, even though the Law of Moses is not something directly applied to us. This is because we all tend to *instinctively* place ourselves under some kind of law, requirement, or rule. These can be self-inflicted, or they can be placed upon us by others – often well-intentioned, good people trying to help us and make the world a better place. Usually, they do this because it was done to them – having had some kind of *law* passed down from generation to generation as a requirement from God.

This seems all so very odd when we see this happening in so many churches today that claim the Good News message about Jesus and the cross. The message of the cross is a message of grace and there is no place for works, requirements, creeds, or doctrinal statements when it comes to getting and being right with God. His way is fully found in Jesus and all he did for us on the cross to save us from our sins. He did not save us from a retaliating God who gives up on people and no longer wants to correct them! We receive, accept, and experience this wonderful Good News simply by faith – by believing that God is love and he desires to live in us through his Spirit. We are the ones who bring in some kind of law and requirements – be it the Law of Moses or some version of law and requirements set up by religious people (usually men).

There is a limited degree of protection found in fear, in guilt, and trying to keep some law (of God or men). Paul acknowledges this. But it's not very good protection from sin and it's the wrong reason. It doesn't work very well. But it does deter *some* people to *some* degree from sinning more than they do already. Living under



law, any law, makes us feel guilty and it shows us we're sinners who hurt ourselves and others. By itself, the law isn't enough to save us from our sin and failure. It won't really get us anywhere. It'll just, maybe, keep us from being too terribly bad. But there is nothing like grace and faith when it comes to finding a real, lasting, perfect solution.

### ***The law was our guardian (3.24)***

Paul offers additional insight into his “protective custody” idea about the law. **Let me put this another way. The law acted as our guardian until Christ came.** And this is true. The law, which is based on fear and not love, does have a restraining effect on people. It *can* guard us against doing wrong but for the wrong reason. The law is greatly inferior and will never be as fully effective as love and grace. It was a lousy guardian, but at least it was a guardian to some degree.

Paul continues, **It protected us until we could be made right with God through our faith.** Many people who lived before Christ were people of faith. But it was harder to have a close faith relationship with God because they didn't have the Holy Spirit indwelling them in the same way we can today. Plus, they didn't have the resurrection as an event that proved to all those eyewitnesses that Jesus was who he claimed to be. All these things greatly enhance our faith. So, the law was given to be a *placeholder*, to keep things under wrap until the real solution, Jesus, had come.

From Moses (the law) until Christ (grace) many generations lived, failed, and did not do well. This is one reason why God must make everything right in eternity. Otherwise, all that failure from the Old Testament, when people were unable to live for Christ as we can today, never gets corrected and their lives were

just wasted away. But all their problems and losses are going to be made right when God “reconciles everything to himself in heaven and earth.” (See Ephesians One and Colossians Two).

This is the promise in the New Testament, where God says, “I’m going to allow really tough things to happen because I know what’s going to happen in the end and how the results will make it all well worth it.” However, it’s really tough right now in life for everyone (in varying degrees) with all the evil and nonsense going on in the world. I wish it wasn’t like this, but it is. I’ve got to believe that God has a greater purpose in allowing everything that happens, good and bad. It’s like how he allowed the law to be here long enough to tutor us to Christ (letting us know what sin is and our need for a savior). Would we ever really understand what grace is if we didn’t first understand what law is and how it doesn’t ever solve our problems?

If God had his grace come upon us, had everything worked out wonderfully, and he didn’t give us the freedom to sin, we’d be saying, “God, I love you ... whatever that means.” There is something about this whole process in life, with all its struggles, that gives meaning to life and who God is. It’s all wrapped up in contrast. If there was no contrast between good and evil, law and grace, hate and love, then there would be no sense of real meaning in life either. Only the contrast between these extremes can show us what really counts. That’s the only reasonable explanation I can come up with. So, this is why Paul wrote, “Let me put it another way. The law was our guardian till Christ came and protected us until we were made right with God through faith.”

Our being “made right with God through faith” does not mean he no longer wants to retaliate against us for our sin or unbelief – God never has wanted that for anyone! Instead, we are “made right” with God by coming into a right relationship with him by faith. If you think about it, believing in God is the only way anyone could ever *be right* with God in such a personal way. So now we’re engaging with him, we pray and talk with God, and

we know he's with us every step of the way in life – even though we can't help but wonder what God is doing, why, and how. But it really doesn't matter. We need only to let him be a God who loves us, always wants the very best for us, and will eventually, in his good time, bring that about.

### ***Faith is important***

Many Christians believe their faith is really the faith that Jesus had *for* us. They realize that Jesus is the one that had a perfect faith in his Father, and that he was more faithful to God than any of us could ever be. Jesus is the only truly faithful one, and therefore, it isn't *their* faith that counts, but *his*. It was his faith and faithfulness that took him to the cross to do what he did, accomplishing everything that needed to be done for us. And so, they believe there was no faith to be had until he came and brought *real* faith with him and bestowed it on us. That's a fair assessment. We can only have faith because Jesus did, showed us what it means, and lived a life that proved it. He's the one that was faithful to God. He's the one that *really* exercised faith. So, we now have faith, too. But ours is kind of a puny faith in comparison, on and off, many times struggling. But *our* faith belongs to each of us, and it gets us in a right relationship with God.

It is important for us to *choose* to believe. God sees our faith and says, "That's good enough for me, because it's what I've done for you in my son that counts. Your faith – tiny as a mustard seed as it might be – shows me that you trust me the best you can and this allows us to have a wonderful relationship where you can grow and learn about me and yourself. This was my plan for you all along." However, I don't believe this means we find favor with God when we exercise faith. Paul does not say this either, even though many people read this into this passage and other passages

like it. God never says anything like, “I’ll start loving you, and I won’t do something bad to you, now that you believe in me.” Our faith has no merit with God, but it does *make us right* with him from the human side of the relationship. This is all that faith can do. When we have faith, we can get into a right relationship with God. How else could we ever, possibly, do so? It is our mind and heart that changes, not God. He never changes, has always loved us, and always will. Through faith we can have fellowship with God, pray, commune with him, and walk with him down the road of life. He can become our best friend. God was even called, “The friend of Abraham!”

So, faith makes us *right* with God; that is, it gets us in the right relationship with God. It doesn't get God good with us because we already are, and Christ on the cross proves to us that God loves us. So, I think that's what Paul means when he says, “The law was our guardian until Christ came.” It minimally protected people until they could come into a right relationship with God, by faith. The word “justification” used in many translations just means “to make right” in Greek (the language in which the New Testament was written). Justification is a hard word to understand, for many people. So, I like translations that don't get too fancy and just use wording like, “made right with God.” It's a better way to say it. Keep in mind that faith is a very good and important thing. Faith is essential in your life with God, but it doesn't *earn* anything with him. If you ever make that distinction, you've got it made, spiritually.

### ***No longer our guardian (3.25)***

And so, this is why Paul wrote, “Let me put it another way. The law was our guardian till Christ came; it protected us (in some limited way) until we could be made right with God (or, come into a right relationship with him) through faith.” Then he

concludes all that he has previously said about the law with this, **And now that this way of faith has come, we no longer need the law as our guardian.** Wow! That's great news. The law has, effectively, been rendered useless – any kind of law and requirements, including the law of Moses. As far as getting right with God is concerned, requirements like, “You must go to church, you must read your Bible, you must pray and help others to earn favor with God” are not required by God. We are now free, but free in the very best way. We are free from requirements, now that we live in grace (unmerited favor of God). But we are also free from the bondage of sin. As Paul said in another letter, “Sin is no longer master over you.” Sure, we will all sin until the day we die, but it is no longer our master because we have a new one, a good one, the best possible master in God through Jesus.

All lists of requirements, creeds, and doctrinal statements – anything that we think is a requirement that God has placed on us – are worthless and of no value to us in our relationship with God. However, reading your Bible, going to church, and loving people *because* you walk with God and *because* you know you're good with him makes all these things good things for us to do. This is because our reason for obeying God is now the result of grace and not requirement. That's a whole different reason; one reason is based on law, the other based on grace.

### ***Putting on new clothes (3.26)***

**We are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. All who have been united with Jesus in baptism have taken on Christ, just as if we had put on new clothes.** I think, ultimately, he means the *baptism of the Spirit*, not water baptism. There's a long-time, popular, religious ritual of water baptism, but it's only a *symbol* of the real baptism that is done in (and of) the Spirit of God. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians he says, “There's

only *one* baptism!” So, the one true baptism is that of the Holy Spirit when we're totally immersed in him, and our new identity is in God, in Christ, and in the Holy Spirit.

We've been united with Jesus in the one, true, real baptism. Now this real baptism in the Spirit might allow you to speak in other languages, maybe even some heavenly language, but it doesn't have to. Baptism in the Spirit never has produced this in me, nor in countless other true believers. But for some, they honestly believe it has. And that is OK. God deals with people in many different ways when they come to him and put their trust in him. This kind of thing should never be anything we fight over or divide ourselves. God made us all very different, and he delights in such diversity. He made us all with different needs and orientations. We need only to be who we are in Christ and let others do the same,

Now, this *new clothes* thing is quite an interesting idea of Paul's when he wrote, “All who are united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, just like putting on *new clothes*.” This is a common theme of Paul's in his New Testament letters. He sometimes refers to it as the *new and old man* that we are and have been. (A better way to express this, in more modern-day terms, is the new and old *person*). This is because when we come to accept, receive, and understand the Good News message about Jesus and what he did for us on the cross, it changes us in our minds and hearts. It is as if we are a *new person*, and the *old person* that we once were is now gone. Most, if not all believers experience this in some way.

### ***No male or female in Christ (3.28)***

Paul goes on and expresses this idea in another way. **There is no longer any Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. For we are all one in Christ Jesus.** What Christ did for us, and

the new identity we now have in him, is so overpowering that it effectively places us far above any race, gender, or status in life. Being in Christ is bigger than anything else. Understand this and you will be free!

Then Paul ties this all into Abraham and the promise about Jesus that God made to him. **Now that you belong to Christ, you are true children of Abraham.** Actually, everyone is a true child of Abraham and his promise, because what Jesus did to save the world was for all humanity. Remember, God told Abraham that he would bless *all* the nations of the earth through his seed (descendent), which turned out to be Jesus. But those who experience their relationship with God by faith in Jesus also experience what it means to be a child of Abraham and of God. Those who do not believe do not *experience* the salvation they also already have; they just don't know it ... yet! Someday they will. God will see to it and will not fail because he will never abandon his "desire for all to be saved." He came into the world "to save it and not condemn it." Plus, "love never fails." All of these are New Testament imperatives. So, we're (experientially) a true child of Abraham when we believe in God and enter into a relationship with him.

Lastly, Paul adds, **You are his heirs and, therefore, God's promise to Abraham belongs to you.** Now, clearly, God's promise to Abraham belongs to everyone (all nations), but it belongs to us who believe in a special and experiential way. It's more of an *experiential* kind of belonging. We are saying to ourselves, when we finally believe, "Wow, I'm cashing in on this Good News. I'm experiencing it; I'm living it. It's wonderful." Other people who don't believe also have God's promise because they're part of the human race that Christ came to save. They just don't know it ... yet!

## ***Drawing all people to God***

I have a friend who told me he always liked the verse by Jesus that said, “If I am lifted up, I will draw all men to me.” To him, this was when baptism came to us – when Jesus was raised from the dead, in newness of life, and we were raised in oneness with him and always will be. I told him that the word *draw* in Greek doesn’t just mean “to attract.” It’s not like magnetism. Instead, it’s like dropping a bucket down in a well and pulling (drawing) the water up to yourself. It’s very picturesque. It’s not Jesus saying, “I’ll make myself attractive to everybody.” Instead, he was saying, “I’m going to draw everyone. I’m going to bring them to myself. I came to save, really save, completely and fully. I’m not going to just try. I didn’t come to condemn. I’m never going to give up. I’m not going to quit. I’m not going to do half a job. This saving work of drawing people to myself is going to happen because I love my world.”

If any of us had fallen into a well, we would want somebody to come and draw (pull) us out. We would not want to just have someone come and yell down into the well, “Hey, I love you and I want you to know that I strongly desire you to be saved from your horrible situation. I hope you find my sentiment attractive!” No. We would want and need to be rescued because we couldn’t rescue ourselves.

We don’t always see ourselves in grace. We need to see ourselves and others without sin – but only in Jesus. In him, we are without blemish, and that’s the way God sees us even though we are sinners. Paul wrote in one of his other letters, “We no longer see people in the flesh” (in that fallen, sinful, human nature). Instead, we now see people in Christ, in the new person they now are because of him.” This is a huge change in perspective because when we start seeing ourselves and others in Christ, even though we are all sinners, our attitude toward them and ourselves changes. It becomes one of love, acceptance,



equality, true friendship, and a sense of community which is God's desire for this world.

### ***Three good questions***

I told my friend who left his wife after thirty years that I saw him in Christ, even though what he had done was not good – and he knew it. I told him, “This is not going to end well.” And he knew that too. I didn't judge him, but I did give it straight to him. I asked him three questions. I told him that *he* had to answer these questions for himself, not for me. I can't and shouldn't answer them for him.

First, “Is what you're doing honoring God?” Second, “Are you really acting in a way that you're loving others – like your wife, the husband of the other woman, and her kids?” Then, third, “Does doing this even make any sense? Is it practical? You've now got to go live in an apartment instead of your really nice home.” I also asked him what he would say to me if the tables were turned. He admitted that he would say the same thing to me. But I also know he would love me, unconditionally, just as I loved him.

Those are just some questions I had to ask if I really loved him and cared about him and his family. I know he would do the same. But the point is that God sees us as perfect in Christ, even though we often act in ways that we shouldn't. But even that is ultimately between each person and God, and we are smart to leave it in his capable, loving hands. So, I just tell people, “I love you. You need to think this through the best you can for yourself. Whatever you decide, I'm still going to be your friend and I will love you unconditionally, just as God does. But I'll lovingly tell you what I think when we talk together, OK?”

## ***Tough Love?***

I've had some people tell me, 'You gotta be tougher and not soft-peddle it. Exercise some tough love!' But others have told me, 'I know you love him, but you're also still judging him.' Well, I've learned that no matter what you do or say in life, someone won't like it. But that's OK. They are fully entitled to their opinion and to express it. For that second person, I agree that there is an aspect of judgment on my friend. But it is more of an "accurate assessment" rather than judging him for not holding my values in the way I do. Big difference. In the NT the Greek word for judgment means "to make an accurate assessment" of a situation or person. This is what is attributed to God when he judges. It does not mean, "to send people to hell, forever." In the case of my friend, I tried to (for his sake and mine) accurately assess his situation – flawed as my judgment might be – so that both of us could learn from it and perhaps change our minds and actions in our own situations.

That's the only kind of judgment I can make. What's interesting is that I remember one day when I was unconditionally loving my friend who had gotten himself into trouble; he grabbed my hands passionately, shook them, and told me, "Thank you so much for being my friend!" He knew that my love for him was unconditional and genuine, even though I told him things he did not want to hear. So, I told him, "I'm going to be your friend no matter what. In fact, you know what I'm looking forward to? It is the day when you get through all this, good or bad, right or wrong. No matter what happens, God's going to do something good in your life."

That's how God works. When all is said and done, we end up freer in Christ than we had ever been before, in spite of what we go through or how long it takes. God uses everything, ultimately, for good. How could he not, and still be God? So, it's okay to tell somebody, "Think through these areas of your life.

Are you really loving other people? Are you honoring God? Is this really a wise, practical thing to do?" These are good questions to ask, but we need to ask them in genuine love toward the other person, not in anger, jealousy, annoyance, or condescension. People get into situations (we all do), and they need to be able to have a conversation with somebody who loves them and will be honest with them without judging them in the wrong way. Look for the best in people and encourage the best in them. The best way for us (and them) to achieve this is to live in the Spirit, live in our knowledge of who Christ is and who we are in Him.

If we try to not sin, that will never be a real solution. It won't work. If we say, "Man, oh man, I'm really going to try not to sin, or fail, or give into temptation," it won't work (not very well, anyway, and not for very long). But, turning to God and saying, "God, I want to walk with you. I want to see myself as the new creation in Christ that I now am, and I want to live in that realm." That's going to be the most effective way to live. It's really the *only* way!

But things still need to play out in people's lives. People are on a journey and things have to happen the way they do ... and God lets it. But when we get all done with our nonsense in life, he's still there! He doesn't abandon us. Right? Even if we do the worst possible thing, he says, "I'm here waiting for you when you come out the other end, and we're gonna go from there. You will learn, understand, and grow closer to me because that's what I always have for you."

OK, that completes the first three parts of Paul's letter to the Galatians. He's got a lot more to say in Galatians Four, Five, and Six. It's a little more practical than these first three chapters, which is typical of Paul's letters: Factual information first, followed by practical application of what he wrote up to that point.

*C Clifton Jones*

# 10. Living Under Burdens (Galatians 4.1-11)

Paul was a pretty famous guy in the Christian world of the First Century, and he ended up writing thirteen letters (that have survived). When he wrote to the believers in Corinth, he referenced an earlier letter that has been lost to history unless someday it's found. Occasionally, they do find additional ancient documents from that era.

In this letter by Paul to the Galatians, at the beginning, he warns against anyone giving out any false representation of the Good News message, and then spends the rest of the letter saying exactly what that message is ... and is not!

## ***Think of it this way (4.1)***

Paul starts Galatians Four like this, **Think of it this way.** Okay, he's saying, "I'm not done explaining this whole thing of grace (and faith) vs law just yet." Remember, his letter is about what the true Gospel (Good News) is and is not. A false gospel is when someone tries to substitute anything (law, works, self-effort, etc.) for the work of Christ on the cross and believing in him. Even our act of believing (faith) cannot be a substitute for

what Jesus did! He did the real saving work, and we only properly respond to it and believe it by our faith.

This fact about the inability of faith to save is important. One theologian I've read a lot of is Karl Barth who said, "Placing our faith in Christ is really saying to ourselves that there's nothing we can do to earn anything with God, including the very faith that we exercise." That's really what faith is –understanding that we cannot, in any way, add to what God has *already* done for us as an act of his grace. We can't earn anything with him. God did it all for us. Jesus did it all for us on the cross. Faith is just what we do to acknowledge all that God has done *for* us. It's not a matter of trying to work up a stronger faith so that God will say, "Oh wow, you're really a faithful person. I'm going to love you more as a result." However, God loves it when we have faith, but he loves it because it's good for *us*, not because he needs it.

**So, think of it this way**, says Paul, as he starts building his case in Galatians Four. **If a father dies and leaves an inheritance for his children, they are not any better off than slaves until they grow up, even though they actually own everything their father left them.** When Christ died on the cross, he died for everybody. Everyone is already, automatically saved from sin, even though they haven't come into an active, right relationship with Christ through faith. Suppose some billionaire said, "I'm going to make everybody in town a millionaire," and deposited a million dollars in everyone's bank account. They'd all be millionaires, even if they didn't want to be, even if they were too proud to accept it, even if they didn't believe it was true, and even if they were out of town that day and didn't hear about it. They would still all be millionaires because it depended only on the grace of the billionaire who acted in their favor. That's the same kind of thing here in the Good News message about Jesus and the cross.

If the children's father dies and they have a trust fund, it's already set up for them. It's theirs, but they must reach a certain age to receive it fully. But they are already wealthy. They've already inherited everything from their father. They just can't touch it yet, but it's theirs. And we can't touch the riches of our spiritual life until we have faith, even though it's already ours. We don't tap into it because we don't believe, and therefore we don't experience it. That's why Paul wrote, "Those children aren't much better off than the slaves until they grow up, even though they actually own everything their father had."

### ***They have to obey (4.2)***

But Paul explains further, **They have to obey their guardians until they reach whatever age their father set for them to gain their inheritance.** That makes sense. The guardians say, "You gotta do this, you gotta do that, and you don't get the money, yet. But I will help you come of age so that when you do get the money, hopefully, you'll be ready for it!"

Then Paul relates this to our spiritual life, **And that's how it was with us before Christ came. We were like children, and we were slaves to the basic spiritual principles of this world.** And there are, indeed, *spiritual principles* of this world. But I think he means those basic spiritual principles that come in false religion and in paganism. Everyone has some kind of spiritual aspect to them, some kind of spiritual life even for unbelievers. When a loved one dies and people attend a funeral and someone prays or plays Amazing Grace, they're in tears, they get somber, and life's not a joke anymore. They realize there is a *spiritual* aspect to life, and they know there's something serious going on.

So, everyone has a spiritual aspect about them. The only reason people get cynical most of the time is because religious

people are so inconsistent and often legalistic in everything they do. So, unbelievers often decide, “I don't want anything to do with all that religious stuff.” But at the same time, deep down inside, they long for and want to experience *true* spirituality. They're hungry for it. They just don't see anything genuine in all the religions that are out there.

That's our biggest barrier ... religion! It's not sin, even though sin is a problem. For sure, it can enslave people through, sex, drugs, rock and roll, new cars, and power. But *religion* can also enslave people in the name of God and in the illusion that they are “free” by reading the Bible, going to church, and so many other man-made requirements. They're so enslaved, it owns them. I mentioned, in the previous chapter, my friend who busted out of his marriage. I think part of it was that he was overwhelmed with trying to be *religious* and keep all the rules in his life from his spouse, family, job, church, and himself. He even (mistakenly) believed God had rules that he needed to keep in order to not be sent to hell forever. What a horrible way to live! This can (and does) drive people to bust out and sin more, trying in the wrong way to be free! I'm not saying that's a good *excuse*, but it's an *explanation*. I think it happens a lot to people.

So, that's why Paul wrote, “They must obey their guardian (the law) until they reach whatever age their father set for them. And that's the way it is with us. Before we came to Christ by faith, we were like children. We were “slaves to the basic spiritual principles of this world.” We have to obey the *worldly* spiritual principles until we can “come of age,” spiritually, and discover the freedom that is waiting for us in Jesus. Make no mistake, the world out there has *spiritual principles*, and they've had them big time. They always did, especially in the ancient world. There were hardly any atheists back then. In fact, they called the Christians “atheists” because they didn't believe in all the gods!



### ***When the right time came (4.4)***

Now, Paul brings a big contrast to all of this in his illustration of daily life. **But when the right time came, God sent his son, born of a woman and subject to the law. God sent him to purchase our freedom for us while we were slaves to the law. This allowed him to adopt us as his very own children.** If I understand adoption correctly in the ancient world, it was more powerful than being a naturally born child in a family. A person could have a child out of wedlock, and they wouldn't necessarily want all their possessions to go to them. We all know how people fight over wills. So, they would adopt their own children to make it legally binding for that child to obtain the inheritance.

Fortunately for us, God *adopts* everybody. Paul references this in his letter to the Ephesians. Everyone is adopted in Christ – but not everyone experiences it. This is why Paul wrote, “God sent his son to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law so that he could adopt us as his very own children.” We are all slaves to the law by nature, so God’s goal was to buy freedom for everyone. Was Jesus successful in his purchase, or did he just attempt to buy everyone?

Paul logically concludes this result from what Christ has done for everyone. But he words it in a way that it looks like it applies only to those he’s writing to. It’s easy to think it is exclusive, just for them. But it’s not. What Jesus did for one he did for all. His atonement was universal in the most complete sense. Often Paul writes to a particular group of people and makes it personally directed at them. He may use “us” or “we” in his writing, but he’s not excluding the rest of humanity. He is just emphasizing how personal it is for them. But in the bigger view of the New Testament, Paul and other writers make it clear that what God has done is for everyone. Here are some examples. “God desires all to be saved.” Could God ever abandon this desire? “He is the Savior of all humanity, and of believers in a special way.” Believers

are special because they actively experience what God has done for all humanity. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans (chapter 5), “Just as Adam made *all* humans sinners, so also, Jesus made *all* humans righteous!”

And so, Paul says, **Because we are now his children, God sent the spirit of his son into our hearts, prompting us to call out Abba, father!** This word *abba*, in Greek, is a very heartfelt, personal reference to God and is more than just *father*. It is more like *daddy* or *papa*. Because of this very personal, intimate kind of relationship we now have with God, because of what Jesus did in adopting us to his Father, Paul further says, **And so, now you are no longer slaves, but instead, you are God's own children. And since you are his children, God has also made you to be his heirs.** We are the ones who, by faith, inherit from God (the father of Jesus) all that he rightly inherits. This makes us more than millionaires!

### ***Before you knew God (4.8)***

Now Paul turns his focus on their previous life, before faith in Jesus. **Before you Gentiles knew God, you were slaves to so-called gods that don't even exist.** We've all been there, and many people still are today. We have all believed in something that is not really the true God, be it a person, a cherished possession, or an ideology. Anything can be a *god* if we worship it and focus on it in an unhealthy way. When anything becomes overwhelmingly big in our lives, it is a *god* to us. It's just as real to us, even though it doesn't exist as a real god. In Paul's day, even more than today where atheism is quite popular, they had a ton of different gods, often one for every occasion and experience in life. Most people were adamant that if they (and others around them) did not appease these gods then bad things would happen.

One thing about the pagan world is they had lots and lots of gods. Everyone had many gods, and they could mix and match them, just as we do today selecting a list of TV channels to watch. They also pretty much let everyone pick which gods they wanted to worship. People were seen as not doing their part if they didn't actively worship *the gods* and kept them all appeased by sacrificing something to them. The common agreement was, "I'll believe mine; you believe yours, and we'll all work together in society to keep the gods appeased." But to worship just one God, as the Jews and Christians did, was a real problem for most people.

Basically, people become a slave to whatever they see as their *god*, even if it is not really a god at all. Paul called these things (and persons) "so-called gods." They might be gods in that they are powerful in people's lives, they might be spiritual beings, or they might just be powerful influences like money, sex, and authority, just as we see going on today. But all these things *can* be gods.

Some religious people today turn their denominations, institutions, and official gatherings into a god that becomes the focus of their lives, instead of the one and only true God who is their Creator. Sometimes they put their pastors and leaders up on a pedestal and make their place of worship an exclusionary kind of thing – a place where you must believe a certain way, you have to perform certain rituals, and follow certain rules.

Anyone can fall into turning something, someone, or some organization into a so-called god that Paul referred to. However, I know a lot of people who go to church, appreciate their pastor, enjoy the benefits of their organization, and still maintain a good and healthy view of the real God, who they know to be their Creator. Other people just operate in a general mode of religious operation. These dear folks usually attend some church, but they don't really know why. They were raised that way and believe what they inherited. So, they just stick with it. It seems right to them that they should live this way. I certainly can't knock this, and each person must decide to believe whatever they think is

correct and be who they are. But some of them might be missing out on something so much better, like the message of Paul's Good News about Jesus and all he's done for them. There is a better life waiting for so many of them. This is what always motivated Paul ... to go out and "preach Christ and him crucified."

There's always something in everyone that makes them want to know their Creator. God has built into everyone a desire to know him, but often, people don't realize exactly what it is they long for and hope for. So, they search in life, and they end up trying just about everything until they finally find what they are looking for in Jesus, who loves them, saves them, satisfies their longing, and will never forsake them. Religion is usually just a mechanism that they've gotten involved in, and it usually masks out who God really is. Some of them are going in the wrong direction. If they'd ever turn around and look the other way – and that's what *repenting* is – they would discover the beauty, wonder, peace, and freedom of knowing God.

### ***God knows you! (4.9)***

This is what Paul's letter to the Galatians is about. He expresses this clearly as he continues on, **So now that you know God, or more importantly, now that God knows you...** Oh, yes, Paul. Thank you. You got it right. Often, we only see it the other way – that we know God (and we do). But what's important is that God knows us! "We love God because he first loved us," wrote John. God always did know us, from all eternity past! That's the real beauty of all this. It's not just that we know God, but that he knows us. It's really all about God knowing you! He always did and he always will. Do you see what Paul is saying? That's the joy.

Well, now it is time for Paul to ask another question. He does this a lot in his letters. **Now that God knows you, why do you want to go back and become slaves again to the weak and worthless spiritual principles of this world?** Why do you think they would want to go back, especially after experiencing all the good things that understanding the Good News brings? Remember how Paul started Galatians Three with these questions? “Who has bewitched you? Who has fooled you? Why do you want to go back to something inferior after you tasted of something so good? Why go back to being slaves to some set of requirements, to the weak and useless spiritual principles of this world?”

In many ways, the Galatian’s real enemies were themselves, just as we are enemies of ourselves, today. God sent his Son to save us from ourselves, from our sin and fallen nature, and from our weakness. God did not send Jesus to save us from *himself* as a vengeful, retaliating God who hates sinners and will, at some point, give up on saving them and punish them forever in hell. It’s just not who he is, and Paul knows this.

### ***Trying to earn favor (4.10)***

But there are reasons why people go back. We're all foolish and weak. We get fooled easily. We can all get tricked into going back, partly or completely, to foolish things. So, Paul tells them the reason. **You are trying to earn favor with God by celebrating special days, months, seasons, and years.** This is what we instinctively tend to do, especially religious people, but also many Christians who claim to believe in grace. We feel we need to *appease the gods*, so to speak, and do things that will win favor with God. But we can’t, because God already favors us, all of us. This is what grace is all about – unmerited favor from God!

As far as rituals, regulations, requirements, and religious practices go, they had them all. They had special years, special months, special seasons, and special days. It's OK to memorialize important events, but if we become *slaves* to them, they start to dominate our lives, and we miss who God is completely. You're a slave to religion if you're trying to earn favor with God by observing certain days, months, seasons, or years – or if you are practicing other various rituals with the same purpose in mind.

### ***I fear for you! (4.11a)***

**I fear for you!** exclaimed Paul. Now, there are people who read this and say, “he's worried about them going to hell forever.” No, I don't think so. Paul never, in any of his thirteen letters, ever warns anyone about going to hell, for any reason. He never even uses the word *hell*! But that's because the word hell (with its modern-day definition of “a metaphysical place of never-ending torment”) never occurs in the Bible, anywhere! There are two main words used in the New Testament writings that are often translated into English as *hell*. This is done to help maintain the theology of the translators and that of tradition since about 500 AD.

Gehenna and Hades are each used about a dozen times in the New Testament. Gehenna is used exclusively by Jesus – five unique times on just four occasions in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John never even uses this word at all. James, however, is the one exception. He uses Gehenna in his letter as an illustration of how vicious the human tongue can be. But he never warns anyone about going to Gehenna as punishment by God.

Gehenna is a proper noun and should always be *transliterated*. This means to bring a word over into another language using the phonetic sounds. This is what the translators did with Gehenna in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament),

and what Jerome did when he produced his famous Vulgate (common language) translation of the Bible into Latin. Gehenna was, historically, a location in ancient Israel where bodies were burned after God brought judgment on Israel for sacrificing their babies to false gods, in that same location. Today, it is a beautiful park just south of Jerusalem.

### ***Hard work for nothing (4.11b)***

But back to what Paul wrote. I think he fears for them because of what they're missing out on. They're going in the wrong direction and missing the whole point of who God is. They're missing out on all that they could experience in life by walking daily with God! So, he says, **I fear for you. It makes me wonder if all my hard work in helping you was all for nothing.** Now he doesn't really believe that, but he's feeling that way. He's really saying, "I invested in you folks and now you're going back to your old way of life?" But, actually, that's typical of people and I think Paul knew it. Still, it affected him emotionally after all he had invested in the form of time and effort in them. We can all understand this. When we invest in somebody, and they bail out, give up, or go back and regress, it is really hard and discouraging. But we don't have to give up on them! God never gives up on us – or anyone else. That's how big, loving, and successful he is. But I understand Paul's sentiment. He spent all that time and effort helping them progress into a much better life, and now they want to go back. Well, Paul's message to them is "Never going back!"

We are wise to keep loving such people and wait for them to come back around, even if we never see it happen. The point is that we never give up because God never gives up. The difference is that he's got all eternity for his love to win. I have a friend who thinks maybe it was tongue-in-cheek humor on Paul's part when

he complained about his work being in vain. Perhaps. Maybe he was manipulating them via guilt at the same time. But Paul is as human as anyone, and it was probably just good old “hurting” that he was experiencing. However, he was well acquainted with *hurting* as he made his way through the difficulties and challenges of life, even though he was a sent one (an apostle). I think he hurts for them more than for himself. Like God, he wants the very best for them. So, he fears for them, and he wants them to just do well in life.

It's like our teenage kids. We don't quit loving them, but we ask them in frustration, “Why are you doing this?” I had one child, when about seventeen, to whom I said, “You don't want to learn the hard way.” And the reply was, “Let me learn the hard way, Dad. I want to do what I want.” My loving response was, “I'm not gonna let you learn the hard way if I can prevent it. When you're 18 ... then you can learn the hard way.” So, at 18 the new response was, “Oh, good. I can do whatever I want, now!” But I had a surprise response. I said, “Not here! If you can afford to live somewhere on your own, then you are free to go do what you want there. But the rules here haven't changed just because you've turned 18.” And I was talking about the loving, reasonable rules that we established for everyone in our small family from the time we got married.

It is interesting how we can all get dazzled by a false sense of freedom. There is a false kind of *freedom*, even in doing what is wrong. But it's the destructive kind of freedom and God allows it. Generally, we get to do whatever we want in life. Often, it's so dazzling and so invigorating that we don't care about the future or consequences. It's like “the pleasures of sin for a season.” Remember that verse?



# 11. Enduring Pain for You (Galatians 4.12-20)

## *Live in Freedom (4.12a)*

Well, Paul marches right along in his letter, into verse twelve. **Dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to live as I do, in freedom from these things. For I have become like you, non-Jews, free from all those laws.** Wow. For Paul, becoming not so “Jewish” meant being freer! Why? Well, the Jewish religion was overloaded with laws, rules, regulations, commandments, ordinances, special days and seasons, rituals, and a hierarchy of leaders. That’s a lot to get out from under to gain real freedom. Many religions today have all these and even more. Notice that Paul’s idea of freedom is getting out from under those many laws.

The Gentiles (non-Jews) started out neutral when they were confronted with the Good News message about Jesus. I don't mean they're *spiritually* neutral, but they didn't have the law hanging over them. The Jews – they had to undo all that law stuff in their minds and hearts to even consider the Good News about being free. That's why it was so hard for most Jews to find Christ. They'd been so indoctrinated into laws and rituals that anything new, even real freedom, seemed wrong. We have this same problem in the modern-day church. Just try to tell religious people

the Good News about freedom in Jesus. All the indoctrination and background they've received (in the name of Jesus) prevents them from seeing all that God has for them and wants them to experience. They think that what they experience in religion *is* the Good News. But it never is – not if it means still living under some kind of laws and requirements in their spiritual life. This is why Paul wrote this letter to them, to try to teach people (Jews and Gentiles) how to be free in Christ, who was the one sent from God to free them. He was the Jew's coming Messiah that they were looking for, but the law got in the way and stayed in the way, even drawing them back into that old way of thinking and living, and they missed their Messiah!

Most Gentiles were pagans, and they already had a view of the gods, so they were more easily converted than the Jews because they didn't have that intense, detailed, legalistic law of Moses hanging *over* them, and embedded *in* them. I think that's what he's saying, “Dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to live as I do in freedom from those things,” – from things that enslave them. In fact, this is why Paul could say that he had become like them, like the Gentiles (non-Jews), free from those laws. Keep in mind that although Gentiles were free from the law of Moses, they still weren't totally free because they hadn't come to know Jesus and the Good News message about him. But Paul was telling the Gentiles that they were already halfway there and that he was with them on their journey toward Christ as their savior, having only arrived ahead of them in recent years.

### ***You did not mistreat me (4.12b)***

He goes on, still talking to all these believers in Galatia, **I so appreciate that you did not mistreat me when I first came and preached to you. Do you remember how sick I was when I first brought you the Good News about Jesus? It's**

interesting that God works through people even when they're sick. God never stops, never quits working, and always finds a way around (or even through) things that get in the way. He may even use difficult things but in a good way. You could be sick and struggling, and the person that you're ministering to might be thinking, "Wow, this person loves me enough to not think about themselves, but instead thinks about me even when they're struggling." That can be very powerful. It can be a good thing.

Then he goes on, **Even though my sickness tempted you to reject me, you did not despise me or turn me away.** He understood that his first impression was not all that great and that it would be normal for them to reject him. But they didn't! "You did not despise me or turn me away." They might have thought about turning him away, but they didn't do it. **Instead, you took me in. You cared for me as though I were some kind of an angel from God or even Christ Jesus himself!** Wow, that's real love. Paul must have been pleased to see how fully they had learned what love means, something more than words. Love is action!

### ***Where is that joyful spirit? (4.15)***

Paul was so thankful that they had such a godly and loving attitude. That was where their heart was toward him at that time, way back when he first brought them the Good News. But now he has to ask them, once again, **What happened to that joyful and grateful spirit you felt back then? I'm sure you would have taken out your own eyes and given them to me if that were possible.** This is one of the reasons many people think Paul had eye problems. This might have been the *thorn in the flesh* that he struggled with and mentioned in another letter he wrote. He

even says at the end of this letter, “Look at what big letters I use to sign my name.”

So, Paul pleads with them on a personal level when he asks, “What happened to that joy you once felt? You were so loving back then. You would have sacrificed something of yourself, for me!” And just to make it more personal and pointed he then asks them, **Have I now become your enemy, just because I'm telling you the truth?** Truth can do a variety of things to people who hear it. For these folks, initially, it melted their hearts and made them more loving, even sacrificially so. But now it seems that the same truth from Paul is somehow turning them against him. This happens often today in our world. People who are otherwise honorable can sometimes turn on others very quickly if they feel threatened or if their convictions are not fully embraced by someone else.

So what truth was Paul telling them? What turned them around and took them back to an old life that had no freedom? Well, it's got to be the Good News or some extension of it. It's probably not so much the message itself, but how they are receiving it (or not) based on other influences in their lives. This, too, happens a lot in our world, today. People can believe something, appear to be solid in it, and then suddenly, they have forsaken long-held values. The way Paul's expressing his concern, he seems to be saying, “You've gone off the rails. You've been bewitched. You've gone back under the law, which is worthless. It doesn't make you happy, there is no satisfaction in it, and you're not free anymore. Why would you do this?”

### ***Why people go back***

So why would they do that? Why do you think they would go back? It is one thing to be under law and obligation, try to appease the gods, and engage fully in legalism. When that's where people

have always been and they know no other lifestyle, it is understandable that they will live that way and stay there. It's all they know. But once someone has tasted real freedom and found out that Christ died for them and took away all the obligation of the law, leaving them free to walk in Christ and in the Spirit, why would they go back under the old legalism? Once they see the truth, how can they not still see it?

The answer may lie in the fact that we all understand falling back into something to some degree. It could be a habit, a mindset, or an attitude. Especially during times of weakness, temptation, or a time when we're just exhausted with life. That's when we're vulnerable, weak, not thinking straight, and making bad decisions. But here is an additional thing. If we're trying really hard to live the "Christian life," new and beautiful as it is, it'll wear us out simply because we're trying too hard, and we will inevitably fail. That can be very discouraging.

What will we fall back into after we find out we can't really live this life on our own, in our own power, by our own effort alone? We'll fall back into the easy stuff – not the good stuff – the easy stuff. We slip back into just hanging out wherever we are, not being careful about our life, and living with "if it feels good, do it," which leads to more trouble. They tasted of the Spirit and freedom, and then they fell back into legalism because it was an old habit. Many people fall back into something bad for them simply because the new thing doesn't work as expected. They can also miss their old friends and surroundings (awful as that may have been) because they were *familiar* and it was their way of life for so long. People sometimes have to experience something better for quite some time before they can fully appreciate it. They may have to go through several rounds of falling back and recovering before this appreciation is fully realized.

Plus, people get lonely! We can feel we have lost our friends and lifestyle because this new road we've taken in life is not one that everyone travels on, even though it's a better one. We're

afraid of change, and we don't know what's coming next. So, we go back to the familiar surroundings we were used to, and we make them crutches in our lives. I have a friend who told me every time he would try to quit smoking cigarettes, he would get mad and go buy another pack. He did this because would become tired of life and feel so alone, even though he had friends around him. But those friends were not about to help him make a good choice. He learned that sometimes he had to just let them go because they were not going where he knew he needed to go.

For a lot of people, what binds them to religion isn't just the religious trimmings, it's the relationships, the togetherness, the sense of community, and one more thing ... peer pressure! Kids aren't the only ones with peer pressure in their lives. Adults experience it, too. Often, it is big-time peer pressure! This is because if we step out of line even a little bit, start to think for ourselves, consider other ideas that are unpopular, or go a little different direction, we then start to worry about, "What will they think of me?" In any religious community, you may get in trouble – not for doing anything wrong but for *not conforming* to an accepted standard. This usually comes in some form of laws, rules, expectations, and requirements. Often, they are never clearly defined until you overstep them and then you find out what they are. This is a horrible way to live, but it is what living under the law is all about. There is no real freedom!

Some, but not all, churches tend to have a very strong, binding code of conduct in belief and speech. So, finding your freedom in Christ sometimes comes at a high cost, even though they claim themselves to be "free in Christ." But are they? Look carefully at their lives. Some are, but some are not. It's not for us to judge, but we can learn by observing others and evaluating our own lives before God. That's why, sometimes, we have to find new friends that agree with us so that we get support. At the beginning of any change we make in our lives, we only get a taste of the benefits and we're still living with all the difficult choices

we have to make. We tell ourselves, “I’ve got to give this up.” Our transition, our journey, is sometimes back and forth, up and down, in and out.

Maybe some of Paul’s ideas help explain how it is that these believers in Galatia could so easily go back to their old lifestyle of bondage under laws, regulations, requirements, and obligations, instead of staying in their new-found freedom in Jesus and the Good News about him! They seemed to have lost the newness of it all, which is normal for humans when the new wears off. And it always does wear off, eventually! We always need to be ready for that. We have to figure out if some new thing we’ve gotten ourselves into is the real thing, if it’s substantial, and whether or not we can count on it. We need to find out if it is all a bunch of hype or if it is a real solution. Usually, only time and experience will give us the answer. Paul must have gone through this since it took him fourteen years to sort things out. So, I assume he is compassionate toward these folks in Galatia who have so easily gone back, yet he wants to be firm with them and maybe even shock them back into reality for their own good.

### ***Those false teachers (4.17)***

Well, Paul's telling them a harsh truth. He's telling them the real truth and warns them that, **Those false teachers are so eager to gain your favor.** Actually, this is true of all teachers, not just the false ones. Even true teachers want people to follow them and believe their message. This is what motivated Paul to travel the known world, getting the Good News out to everyone. Teachers are human and they can’t help but desire to know that they’re important, or at least that their message is. They want to be appreciated. But they are foolish if they live for that desire and make it the focus and goal of their lives.

Regular people (non-teachers) can also easily fall into the same trap in their spiritual lives. Any of us can want other people to see us as *spiritual*, wanting others to respect us and think highly of us. It is easy to seek this in life instead of quietly living for God. There's a lot of trappings out there. Know what they are and avoid them if you can. But Paul, he's just giving it straight to these Galatians about false teachers. He warns that they're eager to win favor because it's all about themselves. Paul's life consistently demonstrated that he did not make it about himself; instead, it was always about God and others.

So, he goes on and says, **But their intentions were not good. They're trying to cut you off from me so that you will only pay attention to them.** A good teacher and a good leader is actually more “hands off” when it comes to those they teach and lead. They will usually say, “I love you and I’ll prove it by respecting your right to make your own choices before God.” But that same teacher will also encourage you to do what is right. Paul, many times in his letters, would say things like, “I urge you, by the mercies of God...” and then would tell them what he urges them to do. In one place, he said, “I could command you to do this, but I won’t.” He respects the fact that it is God who must work in people’s lives and all he can do is tell people the truth, warn them, and encourage them to do the right thing. Any good teacher in your life will do the same thing.

Paul was effectively saying, “I’m gonna tell you the truth. I’m gonna be your friend no matter what. I’m gonna love you unconditionally, as God loves all of us. I’m not going to try to shame you or guilt you into doing what is right. I’m not trying to win your favor to have more people follow me. I’ll always be here to serve you.” A real minister, a real person who cares, serves each person by telling them the truth. But they also serve by just being there *with* them and *for* them, and saying, “When you're ready to talk, I’ll be here for you.” Do you have friends and teachers like



this in your life, who are strong enough to ultimately trust you alone with God? They will tell you, “I’m willing to talk. I’m going to be your friend no matter what you do. It doesn’t mean I think what you do is okay, but I’m here for you in spite of that.”

Who will you turn to when you are ready? Someone like this who is strong, who you know loves you, and who is not just pushing you to satisfy their own ego as a teacher or leader? We instinctively go to someone *strong*, but also someone *safe* when all is said and done. However, sometimes people go back and follow the cheap, quick, tricky teachers who don’t really love them and are trying to just win their attention.

Paul continues in verse 18, **If someone really wants to do good things for you, that's great! But they should do it all the time, not just when I'm here with you.** The problem was that when Paul came to town the false teachers realized that people were coming back to their right senses, which caused these false teachers to lose their grip on their followers. Life is always a battle for the hearts, minds, and souls of people! It’s ultimately God’s fight and one he will win, but he lets us be a part of it if we choose to do so. However, our lack of participation will never disadvantage God!

So, the false teachers who were trying to take people back under the law (and therefore under their control) started being really nice to them when Paul was in town. But it was a false niceness. So, Paul is pointing out that if those other teachers really loved these dear believers, they would be kind, loving, and supportive *all* the time, not just when Paul was around to threaten their puny situation. Paul truly loved these folks, in stark contrast to the false teachers.

## ***Labor pains for you (4.19)***

A real teacher, one who really loves through Christ, is going to love you no matter what, and it won't be conditional. It won't be just now, and not later. So, Paul expresses his most honest feelings for them, **Oh my dear children, I feel like I'm going through labor pains for you, and I know they will continue until Christ is fully present in your life.** He's saying this is painful for him to watch. And it is, indeed, sometimes painful to help other people. It's often painful for other people to help us! If you've ever helped one of your kids, a friend, or a hurting person, sometimes they make *some* progress, but then they slip back. This is painful because we kind of go through it *with* them since we are closely involved. We care. Maybe we've been on the receiving end when someone cared about us, too, and they hung in there with us when we kept falling and tripping. Maybe they helped us get back up and they waited for us. When they waited for us and helped us back up, it made us realize we can do the same for others, too. But it's painful just the same.

So, Paul compares it to labor pains, even though he had never experienced them! I never have, either, but I witnessed, first-hand, the miracle of birth with my two kids. I did not experience the pains of labor, but I sure as heck watched it. It was very painful for me, but painful in a different way than being the one going through it. I decided, then and there, that if we had to take turns giving birth ... we would only have one child! I don't know how women do it. Don't tell me women are weak! They are not weak when they have babies. That's the darn hardest thing I've ever seen. Like many things in life, it's easier to talk and teach about how to have a baby, than it is to actually give birth to one!

So, Paul is using the imagery of birth pains to describe how he feels, watching these false teachers cut the Galatians off from him and regain their loyalty. He expresses how painful this is for him to witness. He even told them that if someone is eager to do

good things for them, that's alright. But they need to be willing to do it *all* the time and not just when he is around. The contrast is impossible to miss.

Additionally, Paul claims that he fears that his pain in watching them will continue until “Christ is fully developed in them.” He knows how long this can take (if ever in this life), and that this is part of the pain that he endures. But clearly, he is willing to go the distance with them. He's just saying, “This isn't easy. I'm not having fun here. But I'm not giving up, either. I'm not quitting. Even if you quit, I will stay faithful to all of you and to God.”

He goes on and tells them, **I wish I could be with you right now. If I were I would change the tone of my message to you. But, here at a distance from you, I don't know how else to express myself but to give it straight.** It's hard to say exactly what Paul means by this, but I'm guessing that maybe he's saying, “If I were there, I could be less harsh than the way it comes across in a letter. But, from this distance away, I've got to be harsh with you and tell you the truth. I'm not going to sugarcoat it and say that your situation doesn't matter. It does matter because you're missing out on something really wonderful!”

## 12. The Two Women (Galatians 4.21-31)

### *Two sons from two wives (4.21)*

Okay, now this gets interesting. **Tell me, you who want to still live under the law, do you know everything the law requires you to do?** He is asking them, “Do you *really* know about this law that you so quickly want to go back under? Do you really know what it’s all about? Maybe you’re just used to being under it and don’t fully understand all the implications. Do you really know everything the law says, what it means, what it requires, and how harsh it is?” Paul is telling them that the law is not just difficult, it's impossible.

He then offers yet another illustration from the life of Abraham to make his point. **Scripture says that Abraham had two sons, one from his slave-girl wife and one from his real wife, who was not a slave.** OK. Abraham had a wife, his regular wife, but then he had this slave girl that he thought he could use to solve God's problem of fulfilling his promise. Paul will get to this in detail, soon. But he makes the point that there are two sons, one from a slave wife and one from his real wife who was not a slave. The son of the slave wife was born because of Abraham’s human attempt to bring about the fulfillment of God's promise. But the son of the free-born wife was born because God fulfilled his promise in his way and time. If you remember the story, Abraham got tired of waiting for God to bring a promised

descendant that would someday bless all the nations of the world. Keep in mind that Paul said earlier in this letter that just one person would descend from him – and it turned out to be Jesus, some two thousand years later! It wasn't about Isaac (son of his real wife), or Ishmael (son of his slave wife), or any other descendant. It was about that one, important, promised descendant that would come as Jesus Christ, the Messiah, many, many years later.

But all Abraham knew was that he was going to have a child, that it hadn't come yet, and that Sarah and himself were not getting any younger. They were both old and well past the normal ages for childbirth. So, Abraham decided that he was going to make this overdue childbirth happen. "I'll get it on with this younger slave woman," he may have thought to himself. "She's young enough, we'll have a baby, and that'll be good enough. I'll help you out, God!" Isn't that a bit typical of us? We often laugh or cry at how things are going (or not going) and we try to help God out. We really believe something and it's taking way too long, so we feel like we need to step up and do something to make it happen before the window of opportunity slips away.

### ***Flesh vs Spirit***

This is a perfect example of flesh vs spirit. When we do things on our own that we shouldn't, out of a motive of impatience, it's our *flesh* (our old, human, fallen nature) at work. This was what was happening in Abraham with Hagar, the slave girl. But God still loved Abraham. He was still going to keep his promise to him and bring a descendant as planned. But there are always consequences that come about when we act on our own and do not wait for God. So, Abraham's life got tougher and more complicated, because now he had two families and two sons to deal with. Have you ever made your life tougher and more

complicated as a result of not waiting on God and not trusting him to keep his promises? I sure have! But the good news is that God never gives up on us – or anyone! He lets the consequences happen to teach us the importance of trusting him. He doesn't let anything get in the way of accomplishing all that he wants for us in life and in eternity. We can be sad and regretful for our failures, but we can also always rejoice, knowing that God will never fail to work his will in our lives simply because "love never fails."

So, God blessed the illegitimate family, too, and had a purpose in allowing all this to happen. He used it for good, just as he does everything in life. He always takes our messes and cleans them up for us. But still, we have to go through the consequences that come with our messes. Sometimes God doesn't clean up *all* the consequences and leaves them a bit messy as a lesson and reminder to us. But he says, "I'll work in spite of it!" He also says, "Okay, we can do this the easy way or the hard way, the slow way or the fast way. But I'm gonna get the job done either way."

### ***Born in a human attempt (4.23)***

So, this is why Paul asked, "You who want to live under the law, do you know what the law actually says? Abraham had two sons, one from a slave wife and one from a freeborn wife." Then he went on and wrote, **The son of the slave wife was born in a human attempt to bring about the fulfillment of God's promise.** Abraham knew God promised him something good. He wanted to help God fulfill his promise. But God fulfills his own promises. This is so prevalent in any religion today. God says. "I love my world and I've come to save it, not to condemn it. I'm gonna do it in my good time." But what do those in religion often (but not always) say back to God? "I don't think you're gonna keep your promise. I don't think you're gonna accomplish

what you set out to do, so we'll help you out. We'll make up creeds, write binding doctrinal statements, we'll have conditions we will place on people, and we'll add rituals that they can experience. We're gonna help God save people. We're gonna go tell them the Good News so they can be saved from God doing something horrible to them in eternity. In fact, we will save them from a God who wants to act in pure retaliation and gives up his desire for all to be saved."

If you think about it, some of the modern evangelical gospels are really about, "You can be saved from God because he's the one that's coming after you in a bad way, with no corrective purpose whatsoever." Now, I think it's true that God's coming after people, but he's coming after them to save them; he's not coming after them to condemn them! He's going to double-down on saving all humanity, when he comes back. When God comes back, he's not going to go from Dr. Jekyll (the healer) to Mr. Hyde, (the maniac crazy man). True, he's coming back in *judgment*. But judgment, in Greek, simply means "to make an accurate assessment," and that's just what God will do as a way for all to see what really happened in life, allowing us to fully understand his grace and how amazing it was in saving his world! God, for sure, also *condemns*. But what does he condemn? He condemns everything that needs it, like *sin in the flesh* as Paul describes it in his letter to the Romans (chapter 8). God is coming to finish the salvation job he started on the cross. We don't have to turn everything into something negative, making God a failure so that we can be the ones trying to help him be successful. There are a lot of parallels here between Abraham, back then, and us today!

### ***Hagar's legacy (4.24)***

So, Paul is comparing the two sons – one born of the slave woman (his make-shift wife, Hagar) and one born of the free

woman (his real wife, Sara). One son (Ishmael) was the result of Abraham's attempt to bring God's fulfillment, and the other son (Isaac) was God's actual fulfillment in his perfect timing. So, now Paul explains what his purpose was in bringing this comparison. He has a much greater *spiritual* lesson in mind. **These two women serve as illustrations of God's two covenants. The first woman, Hagar, represents Mount Sinai where people received the law that enslaved them.**

So, the first woman, Hagar, represents the law and all the slavery that comes with it. That's what the law did – enslave people. It didn't, and couldn't, save anyone. The law enslaved people and God allowed it so that they would learn what sin is. The law pointed out (acted as a *tutor*) that they need a savior. The law makes people realize, "Man oh man, I need God." Many of them thought, "I'm gonna keep the law and God's going to be okay with me. I'm going earn his favor." But they didn't keep the law and they were very aware of it. Some tried harder, others faked it and fooled themselves (as the Pharisees did in the days of Jesus). People do these same things today!

The most that *law* can ever do is show you that you can't keep it, and that you can't save yourself by trying to keep it. Pretty simple. That's really all the law does – it enslaves people and that's how they learn their lesson if they are paying attention. But what a wonderful lesson to learn, when we learn it and go onto much better things found in knowing Jesus and the Good News!

So, the first woman, Hagar, represents Mount Sinai. That's where the Ten Commandments were given to Moses, who passed them on to the nation of Israel. But next, Paul immediately connects Jerusalem to Mount Sinai and the law. **Now Jerusalem is in some ways just like Mount Sinai in Arabia because Jerusalem and her children have always lived in slavery to the law.** The Jerusalem of Paul's day, with all the aspects of law and Jewish religion, had become like Mount Sinai where the law



had its beginning. The Jews, 1500 years after the law was given, were still lost in it and in need of being saved from the bondage of it.

### ***Sara's legacy (4.26)***

Then Paul turns his attention on this other woman who represents the Good News message of freedom from the law. **But, on the other hand, the other woman, Sarah, represents the heavenly Jerusalem.** It's a *heavenly* (not of this world) type of Jerusalem that represents a new place, a new and better way of life. It is the *real* Jerusalem where the real stuff happens, the ideal, the future of this earthly realm, the real kingdom of God that Jesus talked about. **She is the free woman, and she is our mother, just as Isaiah wrote ...** So now Paul goes and grabs some prophecy from Isaiah to help make his point, **Isaiah wrote this: Rejoice, oh Childless woman. You have never given birth.** That would be Sarah. She was old and unable to have children. **Break into a joyful shout since you have never been in labor. The slave woman now has more children than the woman who lives with her husband.** Wow, the reason Sarah needs to rejoice is because the desolate woman (Hagar) has more children than her! And from this Paul wants his readers to celebrate. So, he says, **You, dear brothers and sisters, are children of the promise just like Isaac was.** It was through Isaac (Sara's son, the child of God's promise), not through Ishmael (Hagar's son, the child of a human attempt) that the world would someday be blessed. But the beauty of all this is that through the promised descendant, Isaac, Jesus would eventually come making all these Gentiles in Galatia also children of the promise. They need not be Jews or live under the law to benefit from God's promise! They can now, also, live in Christ the promised one who came, and they never need to go back under

the law even though they were tempted to do so by false teachers and false gospel messages.

### ***You are now being persecuted (4.29)***

Paul further makes this point in what he says next, **You are now being persecuted by those who believe you should always obey the law, just as Ishmael, the child born as a result of Abraham's human effort, persecuted Isaac, who was the child born by the power of the Spirit.** Paul is drawing an analogy here. There has always been a tension between Isaac and Ishmael, the descendants of each woman, which continued into Paul's day ... and even continues into our day! Look at all the trouble in the Middle East between Israel and its surrounding Arab nations.

There exists a *spiritual* conflict, today, that is symbolized by this age-old conflict. It is the tension between religion (appeasing God) and relationship (experiencing God). It's between bondage and freedom, between those free in Christ and those who are kept in bondage under some kind of law. I'm not saying everyone who goes to church is religious in a bad way. James, in his New Testament letter, distinguished *true religion* as taking care of others who are in need and focusing on your own walk with God rather than others. But there is another kind of religion; it brings bondage, not freedom. There are people so bound up in religion, they think they're free. This makes them think that other people who don't come and join them in that intense religiosity of keeping all the rules and rituals, and blindly obeying a hierarchy of human authority (rather than God) – all such other people are seen as wrong, heretics, and not to be included. But these religious people are the ones who live in bondage. They're not free, even though they think they are because of all they do.

Actually, it's just the opposite. When someone has never tasted freedom, they can't know what freedom is. All they know is what they experience in bondage. Everyone thinks what they experience is freedom ... until they taste of *real* freedom, and then they never want to go back.

### ***Sharing the inheritance (4.30)***

Finally, Paul closes Galatians Four with this, **What do the Scriptures say about this? It says, 'Get rid of the slave and her son, for the son of the slave woman will not share the inheritance with the free woman's son.'** Okay. There is some truth in this. The slave child is not going to share the inheritance in the same way that the free child does, because only the free child (Isaac) will bring about the Messiah that will be a blessing to all nations. However, this means that, ultimately, the slave child (Ishmael) *will* inherit the blessings of the promise through the free child, the same way all of us do through Christ.

Paul can't be saying, "Get rid of them, they're out. They'll never be loved by God, and they are worthless." He is just saying that they are not part of God's overall solution in the same way that Isaac is, because Isaac was God's solution to bring about Christ. Isaac, and therefore Jesus, is the solution for everybody including the slave child, all the Arab nations, the unbelievers, all the atheists, all the Buddhists, everyone. Even all the Christians that have a "Christian religion" that they have developed and become trapped in, just as the Jews did. They need Christ, too!

I know that sounds funny, but a little bit of study into the fourth century church will demonstrate what a *religion* Christianity has become. It is very different from the New Testament era church, and even different from the church that existed prior to the Fourth Century. The 300s started with Constantine and his edict of tolerance (in Milan) saying, "Hey, let's all work together,

Christians.” But the Christians wouldn't. They started fighting each other simply because they were now free to do so. But Constantine was thinking, “Christianity's a really good and organized endeavor. I'll make it the State religion and have a better world.” And so, the emperors of that century tried to get the Christians to work together, but they refused. They fought each other for 60 years until, finally, one side won and ended up commanding (in words and actions), “You know what, if you don't believe what we believe, exactly the way we do in our creeds, we're gonna force you to believe it. And if you don't, we're gonna either take away your position in the church, or exile you, or kill you.” That's how it ended up. That's what launched all the mean-spirited stuff in the Middle Ages that exists even to this day.

### ***Children of freedom (4.31)***

Paul's final, conclusive statement is this, **So, dear brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman. We are children of the free woman.** In other words, we who believe in Jesus as the focus of the Good News message to all people, everywhere, we are recipients of grace and salvation through Christ and not through law.

As you will recall, Paul started out his letter rather dramatically, warning anyone who might bring a distorted or false view of his Good News message about Jesus. He was the coming Messiah that was promised to Abraham some two thousand years earlier. But amazingly, Paul never says (in his opening remarks) exactly what this Good News is and is not. But he spends the rest of his letter presenting this message from about every angle and illustration possible. We have encountered all of this in the last four chapters of Galatians.

What is this Good News? Well, it is the difference between law and grace, flesh and spirit, bondage and freedom, and explaining that we are no longer under law of any kind – even the law of falsely trying to believe enough so that God will be happy and not do something terrible to us in eternity (which he will never do, under any circumstances). Our *faith* doesn't save us, it's *Jesus* that saves us. That's a big distinction. Our faith is our admission that we can't save ourselves. It's just saying, "Thank you, God, for saving me and having no requirement for me."

However, there is a requirement if you want to *gain* (not earn) something in your relationship with God. It's faith – it is believing in God and the Good News message about Jesus, and in what he did for us on the cross. But faith is not a requirement that God puts on us and says, "If you don't believe I'm gonna do something horrible to you, forever, in the form of retaliating punishment." Instead, it's the kind of *requirement* that exists if somebody wants to learn to play a musical instrument or excel in a sport. I would tell them, "Well you *have to* learn the scale of notes and learn the chords." But if they don't want to, it's not an ultimate requirement where I'm gonna beat them over the head with a guitar if they don't learn them. It's only a *requirement* if they want to learn to play the guitar. If they don't, the consequences are missing out on the satisfaction of being able to play. There is no retaliation on my part if they don't. I'm just sad for them and am always willing to teach them any time they want to learn. But I will never give up on them becoming a guitarist.

The same is true of faith and obeying God. If we want to have a relationship with him and know him, there are some requirements. One is faith. How can we have a relationship with God without believing in him? Impossible! But if we do choose to believe, it doesn't *earn* us anything. God doesn't say, "Oh good, you've finally believed in me. Now I won't have to do something horrible to you in eternity for rejecting me." No, he says, "Welcome home. You were already here with me in my heart and

mind, but now you can experience a real, active, loving relationship with me!”

So, our faith is simply the *means* by which we experience a relationship with God. It's not a *requirement* God sets up whereby we prove something to him, or to earn anything with him. I think Paul's making that distinction. A friend of mine put it this way, “When we enter into a relationship with God by faith, we're finally aware that our relationship was there all along.” Well said, my friend! I know people who have come to Christ and then told me that they knew God was working in their life all along the way while they were coming. They just weren't ready at the time, but they knew God was working in them. They look back and see it in the events of their prior life.

Helen Keller, who was born blind and deaf, when they finally got through to her, they asked her if she knew about God, and she said, “Yes, I always knew someone was there.” She wasn't talking about what she felt in the physical world. She knew that, spiritually, there was a reality she couldn't deny. Nobody told her about it, she just intuitively knew it was true. She felt the presence of somebody or something there. I think this intuition is built into all of us, and then when we come into a faith relationship with God, it begins to blossom and bloom and grow in us. But it's still faith.

We can't prove God is there, not by any of our five material-world senses. There are some who claim to have done so, and maybe they have, but still, there is no objective proof to offer that an unseen, almighty God exists. There is no way to stick a couple of probes in the air and measure God's existence or the presence of his Spirit. If it's real, we experience it in a way that is beyond this material world. Most people call this faith. Many people I've talked to in my seventy-four years have told me that they know there's *something* beyond what they can see and hear. There has to be. Otherwise, nothing really matters if there is no God.

That ends Galatians Four. In Galatians Five Paul will explain more of what it means to be free in Christ. Keep in mind that all this talk about the Law does not apply directly to us today. But in principle, it does. The whole idea of living under some law, any law, be it that of Moses or some modern-day law that religious people create (and enslave you with), it really doesn't matter. What matters is that we understand what real freedom is – a freedom that can only come from realizing that we have been set free to know and love God (and others) without limit, and it is not something we *must* do. Love is now something we *get* to do and *want* to do!

## 13. You Are Free (Galatians 5.1-12)

We are two-thirds of the way through Paul's letter to the Galatians. You may have noticed that Paul is quite repetitive in his writing. I think there are a couple of good reasons for this. First, he wants to present the Good News message in as many different ways as he can, using illustrations and explanations so that if one method does not connect with a reader, perhaps another one will. But also, Paul knows that people generally need to hear something many times before they finally say, "Oh, I get it. That's what you've been talking about. Why didn't you just say so the first time?" I can just see the frustrated look on Paul's face.

If you are like me and like most people, we all need to repeatedly hear or see something before we realize what it means. So be patient with Paul and with yourself and settle in for just two more parts. These next two (Galatians Five and Six) are gems and they are a bit more practical than the first four chapters. Paul really gets down to the "so what?" aspect of all he is saying. It is in these two final chapters that he tells us what we need to do and what we will gain from it!

### *Christ has set us free (5.1)*

Paul starts Galatians Five with a grand conclusion of all he has said in Galatians One through Four, **So, without any doubt,**



**Christ has truly set us free!** He has *truly* set us free! That's the bottom line. We are free now, folks. We're not free because of anything *we* did, we're free because of what *Christ* did. Our faith just lets us enjoy it, experience it, and be aware of it. There are people out there who are technically free (because of what Jesus did for them), but they don't know it, and they're not living in that freedom that they possess.

Don't get me wrong. They're living in a diminished way, but they don't need to! Sometimes we all slip back into the flesh, or sin, or the old nature, or whatever you want to call it, and we're not living free anymore. But we can be free at any time, and ultimately, we are free in God's eyes. But for a season we have chosen not to experience it. Hopefully (and this was Paul's hope for the Galatians), we won't stay there; we will come to our senses and realize we've been fooled. Christ has truly set us free, but sometimes we don't act like it. We don't live it. We don't experience it. We get mad. We get selfish. We get pulled in. You know the drill. We all do it, but we are truly free (though not always in our experience). Christ has truly set us free!

So now Paul follows up his grand conclusion with some good advice: **Make sure that you stay free and that you don't get caught up again in slavery to the law.** He is referring to the law of Moses that was always peeking at them over their shoulders. But he is speaking more generally about *any* law that enslaves anyone. This hits home with all of us in a world that seems to have unlimited rules, laws, requirements, and regulations. They are all around us at home, at work, at church, at school, and in public. Now, please understand that many of these are good and necessary rules to have a civilized society. But when we start placing ourselves under requirements in the *spiritual* realm, we lose something very important, something very essential ... our freedom. This is the one realm where God wants you to live completely free, in Him. It's our one safe place where

we are loved unconditionally and are helped to grow and become better persons, to our own delight and God's!

### ***Nit-picky laws***

The Jews had not only the famous Ten Commandments but a huge number of nit-picky laws governing every aspect of life. The Old Testament book of Leviticus (the place where most people who try to read the Bible all the way through usually bail out) is loaded with these kinds of laws. But you can also find them in Exodus and Numbers (the two books before and after Leviticus). Deuteronomy, which follows Numbers, is known as the "second giving of the law" (which is what the name of that book means). In it, the law was restated with a bit of commentary. And if this wasn't enough law for the Jews to chew on, they added even more laws of their own, trying to *appease* God even more. These were fully in place by the time Jesus arrived on the scene. The Jews decided people could walk only so many steps on the Sabbath and not carry a mat, fearing that they would be working and breaking the Fourth Commandment to rest on the seventh day (Sabbath).

Talk about a horrible way to live! Yet, there are religious people today who place themselves and others under very similar laws and requirements. Why would anybody do this? It's interesting that Jesus called the Jewish leaders out for their legalism. They would set up these laws, weigh people down with them, require them to be kept, and use this to control others even though they didn't keep these laws themselves. This is why Jesus so often called them hypocrites. They probably lifted mats and walked further than they instructed others to do, but rationalized and said, "Well, you know, we're Pharisees. We're closer to God and it doesn't really apply to us." Who knows? It's hard to say

what they were thinking. But *law* was how they controlled people, and it goes on today, too. Look around!

Leaders need only to lay down a few laws, insist on some requirements, bring in a little fear and guilt, and tell people, “if you don't keep these laws, something bad's gonna happen to you.” Then, mix in a heavy amount of peer pressure and threaten them with excommunication (exiting them from the community), and you've got bondage, slavery, and a loss of freedom. But Paul's message of the Good News in Jesus is, “You're free from all that, folks!” Unfortunately, this group of people who were recipients of Paul's letter were people who had been bewitched (in Paul's words). Remember how he started Galatians Three? After experiencing new life and living in the spirit, they were going back under the law to try to be right with God. How foolish when God doesn't require this. But religious people do, and their influence can be irresistibly strong.

We wonder how this could happen to these Galatians, yet we need only to take a close look at our own lives. We are all, potentially, victims of being fooled again, making our lives miserable again, and living again under bondage. That's how messed up we are if we are not living in Christ and close to God. Without God in our lives, we almost want to be miserable in some strange way. Perhaps it makes us feel sorry for ourselves, or maybe we're just used to being under law and bondage because we can't handle freedom. Or maybe we need to have somebody telling us what to do and what to believe. Some people struggle with thinking for themselves.

Freedom is a tough thing to handle, especially *spiritual* freedom. Some people struggle with it. I've seen people begin to be spiritually free, then they pull in and think, “Oh, that doesn't feel right. I need somebody to tell me what to do. I need to be keeping some law somewhere. I've got to *appease the gods*,” so to speak. It takes time to freely experience freedom, realize it's okay

to be free, and actually feel free. So, Paul tells them, “Make sure you *stay* free, now that Christ has truly set you free.”

Stay free! Keep in mind that we're all technically free in Christ (because of what he's done for humanity on the cross), even when we go back under the law. This is because we're not really under the law; we just think we are. It's an illusion. **So don't get tied up in slavery to the law again**, adds Paul. Living like that is just worthless.

### ***Christ is of no benefit (5.2)***

Paul goes on and gives more encouragement about getting and staying free. **I, Paul, tell you this. If you are counting on circumcision to make you right with God, then Christ will be of no benefit to you.** If we count on *any* ritual like baptism, Lord's Table, going to church, reading the Bible, praying enough – and those are all good things – if we're dependent on all that kind of stuff to try to be right with God then Jesus and the Good News will be of no help to us.

Notice that Paul didn't say that God's going to throw you away and do something horrible to you in eternity. Instead, he's just saying it won't be beneficial to you because you've got all this law stuff getting in the way, like circumcision and trying to *appease the gods* – or, in this case, trying to appease God, who does not require it!

Paul goes on. **Let me say it again. If you're trying to find favor with God by being circumcised, then you must obey every regulation in the whole law of Moses.** Ouch, Paul! Are you saying that if I want to live my life by trying to keep the law, I have to keep *all* of it perfectly and not just try my best? Yes, that's exactly what he is saying. If anyone wants to live that way, that's fine, just keep it all. Don't fail. If you want to depend on

yourself to be a good person, then do a good job. In fact, do a perfect job of it... if you can! This is probably the genius in God allowing the law in the first place. He knew no one would, or could, keep it. But he also knew it would demonstrate something to us that we would never learn any other way – that we need help!

I don't know if the law actually came from God through Moses on Mount Sinai. It very well could have, and the ancient account that has come down to us in the Old Testament writings sure seems to be saying that. But maybe God allowed people to create a law that was already embedded in their hearts, one that was instinctive to fallen human nature. Either way, the law that God brought (or allowed) accomplished its purpose of one big lesson in life about us.

Perhaps God was saying, essentially, “You want laws, you can have them because they’ll be useful in my plan to bring a savior and redeemer of humanity.” All we need to do is get under a bunch of laws and we will soon discover (those who are paying attention, don’t fool themselves, and don’t try to fool others) that we can't keep them. That makes us desperate, and there’s nothing like desperation to make us seek a solution. Hopefully, we will turn to Christ (God’s solution) as presented in the Good News message about Jesus. This is why Paul, in his other letters, identifies the purpose of the law as something that “tutors us to Christ.” It forces us to see our needs. It tells us we're in trouble, that we need help.

### ***Cut off from Christ (5.4)***

Paul continues, **So, if you're trying to make yourselves right with God by obeying the law, you've been cut off from Christ.** Notice he does not say, “Christ has cut you off,” but instead, “You have been cut off from Christ.” God will never give

up on anyone. He can't. It's not his nature since he *is* love and can never do anything but love people, fully and completely. However, he does let us experience the feeling of being cut off from him. Even Jesus felt this way on the cross as he represented all humanity by taking away the sin of the world. He cried out, "My God, why have you forsaken me!" He was crying out *our* cry because it is how we feel in our lonely, lost condition. Notice that Jesus was not crying out to his *Father*, as he usually characterized God. When he represented all of us it was just a cold, distant "God" that he was addressing. That's how we tend to see God ... as G-o-d and not Father, Daddy, or Papa. Only in Jesus does *God* become personal, loving, and secure. Trying to keep some lofty law in our own effort and then failing, leaves us desperate in our experience, our thinking, and our mind concerning God.

Remember how Paul started in his letter to the Romans (chapter twelve), telling his readers that it's their *minds* that need to be renewed – not God's? God's mind and heart is already, forever, made up about us and it is pure love. We can only cut *ourselves* off from Christ. And that is what Paul was implying that we do when we try to keep the law.

Paul continues and says, **You have fallen away from grace.** We have not fallen *out of* grace. That can never happen because God's favor toward us is totally unmerited on our part. But we can fall *away* from grace (as these Galatians had done) and we no longer bask in grace, enjoy it, realize it, or experience it daily.

It's easy to take passages like this, conclude the most negative thing possible about God, and imply that he is saying, "Okay, I'm done with you. No more grace for you, no more love, no more trying to save you. You've gone too far. I'm done with you. I'm cutting you off!" But that is something God never can and never will do. He loves his world and sends his son to save it, not condemn it. God will never abandon his "desire that all be saved." How could he, ever?

## ***We who live by the Spirit (5.5)***

Now, in verse five, **Those of us who live by the Spirit eagerly wait to receive, by our faith, the righteousness that God has promised us.** Wow, what a contrast! It is hard to fully appreciate grace without the law. Everyone either lives under some kind of law in their spiritual life, or they live by (and in) the Spirit. It's impossible to do both, though some people try to dabble in each. However, we can pop in and out of grace and law, occasionally, especially when grace is new to us. This was the problem the Galatians had. People get so used to being under law (awful as it is) that grace can sometimes seem wrong – just too good to be true. But it's not because it is from God, who loves us and always will.

When we choose to live by the Spirit and exercise faith, God declares us OK with him, but not because we've earned it in any way. What happens when we exercise faith is that we experience *being right* with God. In reality, we were already right with him in his eyes because of what Jesus did on the cross. Paul makes this clear in all his letters. In his letter to the Romans, chapter five, Paul makes it clear that it was Adam who threw all humanity into sin, and it was Christ who brought all humanity back into a right standing with God. That's exactly what needed to happen. We just didn't realize it, we didn't understand it, we didn't experience it until we lived by the Spirit. This is why Paul said that we “eagerly wait to receive, by faith, the righteousness of God (a right relationship with him) that God has promised us.”

He continues on, **When we place our faith in Jesus, there is no benefit in being circumcised – or even being uncircumcised. What's important is faith resulting in love.** Right on, Paul. Nor is there importance in doing rituals, or in

being Jew or Gentile, or in anything else. It's exercising our faith in love that brings us the realization that we're *good to go* with God, but only because of what *he* did, not because of anything *we* did (including our act of faith).

## ***Running the race (5.7)***

Now, Paul goes back to his lamenting over these Galatians. **You were running the race so well.** It's not the kind of race where we're going to earn something spiritually. It's life's kind of race, where we must go to work, take care of our family, and exercise our will to conduct ourselves properly. Our spiritual life affects all this *race-running* that we do every day. When we live in and by the Spirit, we run life's race well in everything we do. This is what happens when we believe the Good News message about Jesus and the Spirit he sent to indwell us.

So, then Paul asks, **Who has held you back from following the truth about the Good News?** He knows who, and they know who, but still, it's a good question. It makes them think and realize where they are and how they got there. They need to understand that they are still running the race in life but running it by living under the bondage of the law and trying to earn something. Paul is saying, "You were running the race so well, you were running it the right way, in faith and trusting God. You were getting things done very efficiently and spiritually, but now you're 'held back from following the truth.' Who has held you back?"

Paul's short and quick answer is, **It certainly hasn't been God!** This holding back is *their* doing. It's on them. No blame for God here. God's not holding them back. He's not saying, "Ya know, you're not trusting me enough so I'm going to restrain you," or anything like that. Instead, Paul says, **God's the one**



**who called you into freedom.** And that's God's calling to everyone ... to be free. Then he reminds them, **This false teaching you are getting is like a little bit of yeast that spreads through a whole batch of dough.** He is warning them about the false Good News message, again, that seems to have caught their attention and their commitment.

If you know anything about yeast, it makes bread rise and not stay flat. It takes only a little bit, spread through the dough, to be effective. It's a bacteria or some kind of active ingredient that causes a chemical reaction. Let it sit overnight and you no longer have just a hard lump of dough. You're ready to bake. False teaching (and probably any teaching) is like a little *yeast* spread throughout the whole batch of dough (group of people) and thoroughly affects it (takes them back under the law).

### ***Trusting the Lord (5.10)***

But Paul's belief in God is much greater than his concern about false teachers. So, he tells them, **I am trusting God to keep you from believing false teachings.** Yet, Paul knows better than anyone that God doesn't keep people from believing false teachings. God allows us all to make choices and he gives us time to live with them so we will learn. But Paul also knows God's love will prevail in their lives, and that he will reconcile the whole world to himself (and to each other) in eternity.

Paul is realistic and he knows that people can ignore God and that he may have a purpose in allowing this for some indefinite length of time. Hey, God's got complete control over everything, right? So, he can make anything happen whenever he wants. Look at how Paul came to know Jesus on the Damascus Road. How could Paul refuse God when faced with him in real-time with sights and sounds? So, God can act quickly and decisively when he wants to and when it fits his purpose. But he can also take his

time for the same reason. God is never in a hurry to do things right and work things out so that we will never go back!

But then Paul dumps more judgment on those who are bringing a false gospel message. **God will judge that false teacher who's confusing you, whoever he is.** Now this does not mean Paul thinks God will send that person to hell forever. There is no hint of that here, though many religious people who like to operate out of fear and guilt will say that's what Paul means. Judgment just means "to make an accurate assessment." God will, for sure, always accurately assess anyone who tries to get people to go back under the law. God may very well also bring some kind of punishment on this person. But it will always be the kind of punishment that corrects, teaches, helps, improves, and disciplines. This is how he works with everyone because his goal is to fully redeem all humanity. In this, he will never fail. God does not ignore anyone, either. But he also never abandons anyone. He always acts in the very best interest of that person and those around them. This is always his goal and only goal for all people.

But why does this *false teacher* want these Galatians to go back under the law? Partly because he's under the law, and *miser loves company*, as they say. They are saying, "If I gotta be under it, then so do you! I'm going to bring you back under the law with me so that I don't have to be here alone. If I can bring you back under the law and get you to try to keep it, then I'll have control over you and that's going to elevate me in some selfish way." This is often the motive, and this is what often happens, even in our religious world today.

Paul's really bringing it! Yes, he is fairly repetitive, but he keeps coming at it from different angles in case someone needs another way of looking at it. Plus, these Galatians are kind of thick skulled ... a lot like us! Hagar and Sarah, and all those illustrations

in Galatians Four were really helpful, but I like even more all this great, practical, rubber-meets-the-road stuff here in Galatians Five. And he will continue this in Galatians Six. I think Paul is using Five and Six in his letter to say, “Here’s the bottom line, folks. Here is the *so what* about the Good News.”

### ***Why am I still persecuted? (5.11a)***

Once again, Paul addresses, with affection, these readers he is rebuking. **Dear brothers and sisters, if I were still preaching that people must be circumcised – as some are saying that I do – why am I still being persecuted by them?** Looks like one of the techniques used by the false teachers was propaganda against Paul. As you well know, this happens a lot today in our world – in politics, in divorces, among fighting friends, and sadly in some church settings. These false teachers were, apparently, saying that Paul was preaching what they were preaching – that keeping the law and getting circumcised was required when actually, he was preaching the exact opposite. Do you ever see anything like this in politics today where someone is doing something wrong and then they claim that their opponent does the same thing when really they don’t? This is an old technique designed to defame, confuse, and distract. It works. Watch out for this in your life and in the public arena. Don’t be fooled!

Paul is always refreshingly honest. He seems to be focused on Jesus, who he was, what he did, and not on himself. This was rare in those days just as it is in our day. When I try to honestly evaluate leaders of various kinds (religious, political, bosses) I look for what seems to motivate them. I cannot judge their heart and so I try to give them the benefit of the doubt. But I can (and must) draw reasonable conclusions based on what I observe. There are three big things I watch for that are very telling – money, power, and pleasure. Each category has many avenues

and means. Watch people's lives closely and you will probably figure out what motivates them. In Paul, I do not see any of these three items looming up in his life. This is true of Jesus, too, but to a greater degree!

Paul's proof that they are lying about him resides in the fact that he is still being persecuted by them. If he agreed with them this wouldn't be happening. Therefore, his preaching against keeping the law in favor of faith and grace should be obvious to all.

### ***No one offended? (5.11b)***

He adds this, **If I ever quit preaching salvation through the cross of Christ**, (and that's the only salvation there is, according to Paul), **then no one would be offended**. The persecution he was under and the offensiveness he caused was proof of what he was preaching, and that he did so consistently. That's why they were coming after him. They may have been saying, "Hey folks, Paul quit teaching against the law like he used to. He's not doing that anymore, He's back with us!" That's the way propaganda works. That's the way people get fooled! But Paul was telling the Galatians, "Don't get this backward. I have not changed my message and never will."

About the false teachers he wrote (in the context of them requiring circumcision), **I wish those false teachers who want to manipulate you by circumcision would mutilate themselves**. One translation has Paul saying, "I wish they'd just go all the way and do a complete circumcision on themselves." Although Paul was usually a fine example of love, patience, and kindness, occasionally he could get a little sarcastic. Perhaps, in some way, he was justified in doing so. But this kind of language used by Paul doesn't seem very loving. This doesn't seem to fit

First Corinthians 13 where Paul wrote, “Love is patient, kind, and does not retaliate when wronged.” Perhaps Paul slipped into the *flesh* (fallen nature) a little bit. We all slip back, sometimes, and Paul was only human. I don't know if he was just being sarcastic, or just making a point, or both. But he seems to be saying, “You want to require a ritual like circumcision? Then really do it right. Go all the way and emasculate yourselves!” Now. I gotta say that this whole idea of circumcision being a sign of true commitment seems a bit strange, at best. Plus, it leaves all the ladies out. But this is what tends to come out of any male-dominated culture!

## 14. Deeds of a Sin Nature (Galatians 5.13-21)

### *You have been called (5.13)*

Now Paul settles down and gets back to some good old encouragement and good advice. He writes, **You have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. So, don't use your freedom to satisfy your old sinful nature.** Paul raises a good issue here. I get this all the time. People ask, "If we are all saved by grace, then why can't we go live any way we want? My simple answer to them is, "You can. Go for it. Obviously, God doesn't go around stopping people from sinning and making them act against their will. Which sins that destroy you and make your life miserable for you and those around you did you want to commit? Grace frees you *from* sin." They often respond with, "Sounds like it's a license to sin." I tell them, "No. We all got our license when we were born, and we've been exercising it ever since. Grace gives us the freedom to do what's right!"

Then after Paul tells them not to use their new-found freedom to satisfy their old sinful nature, he gives the obvious and only real option. **Instead, use your freedom** (the freedom you've already got) **to serve each other, in love. Because the whole law can be summed up in just one commandment, 'love your neighbor as yourself.'** I think Jesus actually said there

are two commands, “Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.” I've been telling people recently that I've gotten my personal *doctrinal statement* down to just three items: God loves me; I love God, and I need to love others. For me, this is the bottom line, and it seemed to be for Jesus and Paul, too. I know God loves me, which is perhaps the greatest theme in all the New Testament writings, and that God loves his whole world – everyone and everything. John 3:16 is often quoted as the shining example of God's love, and it is. But also, I know I love God and it's because he first loved me. Therefore, I need to love others because that's what God does! Pretty simple, yet very profound.

Now, of course, we can expand this further in life and come up with many other very good and correct conclusions. I sure do. But one day I got thinking that those are the three things I believe most and hold most dear in my heart, mind, and soul. These are words I can live by. God loves me, and I love him back, and then I cannot help but love others.

### ***Devouring one another (5.15)***

But Paul was smart enough to know that people will not always “love one another.” So, he warns these Galatians about something that can easily come their way and destroy all the good things they have in Christ and in the Spirit. **Watch out! If you continue hurting and devouring each other, you will end up destroying one another.** Wow, that is a very strong and pointed warning, and a very urgent one. It hits home with everyone because it's not a warning about some external threat ... it's a warning about us! Sadly, this kind of thing goes on all the time, and not just back when Paul lived. Devouring and destroying each other is not just out there in the unbelieving world. It exists among believers, too. And this should be the one place where this kind of thing does *not* happen. But it does and far too often.

However, there is only one cause and one solution. The cause is slipping back into our old nature and living under the cruelty of the law, thinking it's all up to us. The solution is simple and opposite. Paul put it this way in another of his letters, "Walk in the Spirit and you will not give in to the desires of your fallen nature."

It is so easy for backbiting and devouring others (verbally) to creep into our lives (sometimes it rushes in) and for the most worthless of reasons. When egos, insecurities, fear, and lust for power emerge ... watch out. Often, the best thing to do is get out of the way of those who engage in such things and let God work. However, sometimes we are called to stand and fight, but not in the same way as we see in others; not fighting fire with fire, not lowering ourselves to their foolish level, but to fight with the most powerful weapon in the universe... love! Real love, not just some wimpy thing where we roll over, give up, and run away. Sometimes we must face bad behavior (in ourselves and others) head on. But we need to "out-love them" and demonstrate what real love is, which is acting in their best interest (not our own), loving them without conditions (as God loves us), and even allowing them to mistreat us as they did Jesus, entrusting ourselves to the Father. I can tell you from my own experience that loving in this way will make people even angrier. But then, when we respond correctly to their anger, it makes us want to love them even more because we see how badly they need God to be in their life and embrace the Good News message about Jesus and his love.

When we find ourselves in the middle of tension and anger and condescension by other people, if we cannot get out of the way, we need to just let them be who they are. Let them believe something different. We need to say, "Hey, I love you, no matter what!" I have many friends who struggle with going to church, sometimes for good reasons but sometimes not. However, in learning the full implication of the Good News message about



Jesus, his love for all humanity, and all he did for all of us on the cross, I'm always free to go to church or not. And when I do go, I look for all the good God is doing and try to ignore all the failure and disfunction (which is always present to some degree), and find a way to actively love others, unconditionally, as God loves me!

When I sing hymns, I really mean what I'm singing. I used to just sing them because I learned them as a kid. Like, "Jesus paid it *all, all* to him I owe, sin left a crimson stain, but *he* washed it white as snow." But now when I sing them, I'm thinking, "Wow! This is something he did for me. It's not something I do. He is the one who paid it *all*. I owe *all* to him!" So, pay attention to those hymns when you sing them. They're quite good. A friend of mine once told me he heard a sermon where the preacher was saying, "You know those hymns that you sing, and don't really mean? You know all those Bible verses that you read, and you don't really believe?" My friend concluded that the truth was right in front of him all the time. He only had to open his eyes and heart and see what God had for him about his great and awesome love for his world. God takes action and never gives up on anyone – not even the chief of all sinners, who Paul claimed to be.

### ***Let the Holy Spirit guide (5.16)***

You may have noticed that Paul uses the word, "so" in a lot of his letters. I think he's telling his readers, "Based on what I just wrote, I've got more to tell you." Here he uses it again. **So, I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives.** Perhaps the key word here is "let." *Let* the Holy Spirit guide you. You don't have to, but it sure would be smart if you *let* him. This means that we are not required to let him, and that God won't force us to do so. We can choose to live our lives the way we want, just as these Galatians foolishly chose to go back to a life of bondage under the law. We

can too! But why do that? We get to be involved with God and his Spirit, if we want to! If we let the Holy Spirit guide us, he will. We get to participate in what he is doing as we follow him. He doesn't make my arm move, and then it goes over and hugs my wife. He doesn't make us do anything. But he urges us, guides us, prompts us, and inspires us. However, we cannot ignore him. This is how God works. He doesn't force, and it puts a lot of responsibility on us. God knows this is the only way we learn. If he made us do things, they would be the right things, but it wouldn't be *our* choice and we wouldn't learn anything. The great power in love is that we choose to do it, not that we must!

But when the Holy Spirit is involved (by my choice – he always wants to be) then I want to do good things. I want to love people that don't love me, even if they aren't happy with me. I just love them and sometimes this makes them angry. But that, in turn makes me want to love them all the more because they are expressing to me their need to know God better and walk closer with him. I want that for them, and more of that for me, too.

“So, just let the Holy Spirit guide your lives,” says Paul. **Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves.** And this is like the idea of “walking the Spirit, and you won't fulfill the desires of the flesh.” This idea is repeated over and over throughout the New Testament writings because we all have that “old person” in us that can never be redeemed or saved or corrected. It is stubborn, corrupt, selfish, and cannot change. It needs to be done away with, and that's why God gives us a new nature when we are in Christ, by faith. That new person we are in Christ can never sin! It's already perfect, and good, and is everything God wants us to be. So, we all have two things going on inside us and there's always a struggle between the two persons – the *old person* that we were in the flesh, and the *new person* we now are in Christ.

## ***The opposite of what the Spirit wants (5.17)***

Paul goes on and writes, **Your old sinful nature wants to do evil. This is just the opposite of what the Spirit in you wants to do.** Do you ever experience this conflict going on in your own life? I sure do. Remember Romans chapter 7 and Paul's struggle described there? He lamented that he did things he didn't want to do, and didn't do things he wanted to do. He ended that chapter with "Oh, horrible person that I am. Who will free me from this body of flesh?" But then his answer was, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ!" Hey, that's the same Good News message that he is defining very carefully in this letter to the Galatians.

The Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what our sinful nature desires. So, as expected, there is a conflict. We conjure up our own desires, resulting in selfishness, anger, wanting to condescend somebody, and wanting to control everything. Oh, that human nature of ours can so betray us! These are the desires we conjure up in ourselves very naturally. It's the natural person in us, our fallen nature, but the Spirit brings desires that are opposed to that.

Perhaps we should be thankful that there is, at least, a conflict going on and we are not totally given over to our old self. Some people in this world are completely given over, but even they will be saved, redeemed, restored, corrected, and reconciled, at the end of time when all has been said and done. Yes, God is that powerful and successful. It is his never-ending, unconditional love that accomplishes this. We *can* win. In fact, we *will* win, but it will be God who brings the victory of our changed life, forever.

Paul gives more explanation. **These two forces** (the Spirit and your flesh) **are constantly fighting against each other. As a result, you are not free to carry out all your good intentions.** On our own, without the Spirit guiding us, not walking with God,

not understanding the Good News about Jesus, and not living in Christ, we will fail because we are not truly free. We are still under some kind of bondage, or law, or influence. Only when we are free can we carry out the good intentions we desire deep in our soul. Failure and slipping back happens to all of us. Our *old nature* gets in the way, and we ask, “Why am I not doing the good things I want to do?” Well, because we get in our own way and do not *let* the Spirit guide us.

So, Paul emphasizes this by saying, in contrast, **But when you are directed by the Spirit, you are no longer under any obligation to the law of Moses.** And now we can carry out those good intentions that are deeply buried in our hearts and minds that eventually come out as good desires from the Holy Spirit.

This is true of any law that people come up with – and people come up with all kinds of laws and rules and regulations. Some laws, however, are necessary to have an orderly society or church. But in the *spiritual* life, where we live in a beautiful relationship with God who loves us, there is no need for any law. We are now free to know God, love him, walk with him in newness of life, and experience joy, peace and freedom in complete fullness. This is what God has always desired for all humanity, and he will ensure that everyone will eventually experience this forever. But this is only because of the Good News message about what Jesus has done on the cross to save the world!

Rules and laws, in and of themselves, are not bad. It’s a matter of *why* they are obeyed and to *what degree* they enslave people. In any aspect of society, public or private, there must be some kind of rules, some organization, and some requirements or there will be chaos. But it seems there is a tendency to overdo it a bit by people who love being in control and making sure things go the way *they* think they should. However, not everyone in leadership is like this. But even those who are good leaders need

to be careful not to fall into the *leadership trap*, lording over people and not truly serving others as they lead them.

### ***When you follow sinful desires (5.19)***

Here is where Paul gets practical again. **Whenever you follow the desires of your old sinful nature, the results become very clear.** Yes. They are! And now Paul lists them – not that we don’t already know what they are. But we sometimes need a reminder. Here’s his list. **These are: Sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy and outbursts of anger.** (That word “sorcery” is the word *Pharmacia* in Greek, like pharmacy and drugs.) There is a lot of this going on in our world, everywhere. We already know about these things on Paul’s list. They are all around us and sometimes inside of us! In families, in churches, in businesses, and in coffee shops. It just kind of oozes out of us.

Here are a few more items from Paul. **Plus, we indulge in selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these.** I think he is saying, “that’s only the beginning, folks. I could go on all day.” It’s only a beginning list, and they’re all the same kind of things. It’s all about us, our own pleasure and desires and that gets so old, so fast. There’s no real true enjoyment in any of these things, nor is there any fulfillment. There’s no sense of accomplishment; they just feed the worst side of us. Or perhaps these are just the symptoms of even deeper problems. Either way, the only real solution is found in God, in his love, in what he provides in Jesus, and in how he alone changes us by the presence of his Spirit.

There’s nothing meaningful in this list given by Paul. Some people just give in to these desires, go down that road, and they look for the next set of thrills for the next day. That’s why some

people start taking drugs, they get discouraged about life, and they get cynical. People can get very cynical about life! I see it all the time. Life for them is, "If it feels good, do it." That is very natural and understandable, but it is also a very cheap and valueless life. This is so tragic, because there's a wonderful life of walking with God and being fulfilled waiting for them. It's not about being better than anybody else; it's about being free from all that bondage, or at least most of it.

We are never, in this material life, completely or perfectly fulfilled and free from sin and failure. Sin will plague us till we die, to some degree. But we don't have to live in all of Paul's list, or even some portion of it. Although any of us *can* slip into some of these things, like quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, hostility – even if you're not doing the big public things, like idolatry and immorality – you can slip into those *internal* sins that are just as destructive. Watch out for this!

That's just the short list. In Paul's letter to the Romans (in chapter 1), after Paul presented to his readers a similar list, he said that such people "invent new ways of sinning." Our old nature is very strange and creative and there seems to be no end to it – unless we seek refuge in the safe place of living in the Spirit. Otherwise, though our lives might be full of stimulating things, we will never experience real peace and freedom.

All of us are drawn to that *dark side* a little bit. We sometimes want to babysit edgy situations, cross the line a little, and play around with danger. It's foolish, but it's in all of us. Some of these things that we're drawn to, we know are wrong but they're very stimulating and we find them hard to resist. Jealousy, outbursts of anger, and selfishness aren't fun things, but they come easy to us because we get in situations that we don't handle very well. The pressure comes on us, and we bring some form of misery on ourselves and others around us.

So, it's an interesting list that Paul gives his readers. Life is not just a matter of, "go have fun and don't bother to think about what you're doing." It's more about the struggle within us that comes out and we must deal with it. Our flesh (human nature) doesn't deal with things very well. The flesh is like a little child that's selfish and wants its own way. There's little or no maturity in it, and no real caring about anybody else. It's just a selfish little brat!

But the beautiful thing about the Spirit is that he really wants us to do well. When we're walking in the Spirit, we want others to do well, too. Now, there's a limit to what we can handle in problematic people, but still, we need to have good intentions toward them which, in turn, comes back on us and produces really good things in our lives

Now Paul gets back to doing some warning. **Let me tell you again, just as I have before, that anyone living that kind of life will not inherit the kingdom of God.** He's not saying that anyone's going to go to hell forever. He never does in any of his letters. But there are consequences from sin – big ones! They can all be summed up in reference to the *Kingdom of God* – a concept he got from Jesus who spoke a lot about it when he was here on earth. Paul is warning that we won't *inherit* this Kingdom of God, which is the realm of God that's in this world. Jesus said that the kingdom is *near* us and *in* us. Anyone who lives in this nasty list of sins *will* not inherit all that God has for them (his kingdom) when they live that kind of lifestyle, the one described in his list of sinful deeds.

When we live like this will not inherit God's kingdom (receive it, gain from it, be a recipient of it) and will stay outside it as long as we live that way. It does not mean that God gives up on anyone or that they are worthless. It only means that they are living, by their own choice, outside that realm of faith, outside the kingdom of God, and outside that safe and enjoyable realm. We

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can prevent ourselves from inheriting all the good things and benefits that come from living in God's realm (kingdom).



## 15. Fruit of The Spirit (Galatians 5.22-26)

### *What the Spirit produces (5.22)*

Paul again sets up a contrast. He loves doing this. **The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, produces a different kind of fruit in our lives.** *Fruit* is what's being produced. If you have a tree, it produces fruit – maybe apples come out on the branches. Well, our lives produce fruit of some kind, either the horrible list given above or the wonderful list that we're going to see below.

Here is Paul's new list, **The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.** That's a great list and it is so different from the list of evil deeds that Paul first presented. Keep in mind that we can experience some combination of the two lists in our lives! However, that's usually not the case. It's hard to fully do things on one list and be fully doing the things on the other list, all at the same time. Still, we should not fool ourselves. We can pop in and out of the two lists, and to some degree we all do.

There are nine items on this *good fruit* list. I memorized these once, and I pondered what they meant. I remember thinking, "That's a great list of character qualities." They are not something to go around bragging about; they're more of what we want to

experience in life when God is involved. They're not just words. To experience being patient and kind in any situation is to feel peace like we've never felt before. It's the kind of peace that "passes understanding," as Paul says in a different letter. We can now realize, "I'm in this crazy world with all this nonsense going on, but I have peace that surpasses understanding when I lay my head down at night." Personally, I chuckle sometimes at night as I observe life, and I think, "OK God, you take care of the rest of it." And then I let him!

What is interesting is that we can't do all these things on this *good fruit* list any more than we can keep the law! This was Paul's warning throughout his letter. But the difference is that these are not *requirements* by God, they are *results* of what happens when God is in our lives.

### ***No law against it (5.23b)***

Then, at the end of this list of nine items representing the fruit of the Spirit, Paul adds, **There is no law against these things.** We can do these nine things all we want! There is no prohibition. There's no limitation on doing these good things. However, the other list is what we sometimes *tend* to do, and those things destroy us. So, Paul has contrasted for us the deeds of the flesh (human nature) and the *fruit* of the spirit. What a contrast. And all those good things are in Jesus. That's where they come from. Even though we are the ones who do them, they're all a result of the cross of Christ, the Good News message, and the indwelling Spirit.

We shouldn't have to think about them all that much or try to do them. If we do, they become a law that we have to keep. They should be the fruit (results) of the Spirit in our lives. It should be organic. We don't need to always be hunting for that correct state of being, or trying to always be what we think God

wants us to be. Just go out there and be you! True, you will not be perfect – not in this life, anyway. But that's what love does for us. That's the freedom we have in Christ – free to be imperfect in our humanness, yet completely perfect in the new person we are in Jesus. That's how God now sees us. When we sin it is, for sure, to our disadvantage. But God always sees it as a learning opportunity to correct us so we can live in even more peace, joy, and freedom.

Freedom means we can go out there, be ourselves, and we can think, “Well, if I'm going to mess up and be a bad person, I know God's love can (and will) change me.” When you slip back into being the *old person* of the flesh – which will happen, make no mistake – it's okay. We're still being who we are, and God has forgiven us. He says, “We'll work through this. Let's do better next time. You're going to get better and better at walking with me. It just takes time.” Sometimes God says, “Wow, we've got a long way to go.” But this does not discourage him. He doesn't say, “Oh man, I don't know if I want to bother with any of this!” He just takes one day, one week, one month, one year at a time with us and keeps on working in us. He never gives up, even when we do!

What a contrast these two lists are! A friend once told me that when she compares these two lists, she visualizes two trees – one named *fear* and the other named *love*. She used to draw out these trees and put all the good and bad characteristics (fruit) on the branches of each tree. For her, the tree of fear is the opposite of the tree of love, and one of those trees will be the root and result of our lives at any moment in time.

We never actually see love itself. We only see the *result* of love. We also never see fear itself. We only see the *result* of fear in how people live, and we see which tree best represents people's lives. To some degree, we are all a mixture of the two trees, but one is always bigger and stronger than the other.

## ***Those who belong to Christ (5.24)***

And so, Paul rightly continues on and says, **Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and have crucified themselves there, also.** Actually, we don't really do the nailing, but we realize that God did. He's using the language of our realizing what he's done. All we can say is, "Wow, you nailed my sins to the cross, I realize it, and so I am (in my mind and heart) also nailing those sins to the cross." We can say this, even though it's already been done *for* us. And the desires of our sinful nature, we nail them to his cross, too. We leave them crucified there. That's where it ends. However, they still *can* plague us in life emotionally, but the penalty of sin is gone and the ultimate victory over those awful things belongs to us.

So, in one sense, Jesus does the nailing of sin to the cross by his sacrifice. But those who know God and understand the Good News message have (in another sense) "nailed the passions of their desires and sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there." They have chosen to do something that is far less than the work Christ did on the cross – to simply believe – and it is something by which there is no *earning* on their part. We all make choices in life, and we need to decide if we want to experience the list of good things that result from God's Spirit in our lives, or not. However, we do have a choice to make. Elsewhere in the New Testament, it says we can *grieve* the Holy Spirit and that we can *thwart* him. We can make bad decisions, but Paul said in his letter to the Romans (chapter 6), "Consider yourself dead to sin."

So, there's always an invitation from God to do what's right, because God gave us the ability to choose. God doesn't just automatically and completely do everything in us and for us. True, he's the one that gets the credit, and he's the one that ultimately

accomplishes good things in our lives. That's because he's involved with us, he's the big influence, and he brings about the big accomplishments. But we do need to do something to move in that direction. However, when we don't, he doesn't abandon us, he doesn't say, "Okay, I'm done with you, you're a piece of junk, I'm going to torment you forever." He just says, "Well, you know what, I'm still coming after you and I'm going to keep coming after you, and the more you sin the more I'm determined to get that junk out of your life, even if it takes your whole life or if your correction has to go into eternity."

Some people believe God will finish freeing us from sin at the time of death when this life is over, and all the testing and learning is complete. Other people believe that when we die, that's the end of our sinful nature and we're good to go with God. But still, others believe God gives up on people after they die if they are sinners or unbelievers. So, there are different theories out there about what happens after death.

I think a more important question is, "When we sin, what does it make God want to do to us? What does it invoke in him?" Does God look down and say, "Oh man, you piss me off!" Does it make him want to do something bad to us just to get back at us, or punish us just to prove that he's the big, almighty God and "how dare we go against him?" I don't think so.

I think when we sin, it makes God want to love us all the more and say, "I want to do something about that sin in you and get it out of your life." He wants to do some correcting and some restoring. That's what gets invoked in God when we sin, not retaliation! There are a lot of folks who get caught up in religion and see God as someone who, when we sin, will cause something bad to happen. Well, it's true that when we sin, something bad happens to us, but it's not God retaliating against us. It's the bad consequences of life that God wants to save us from! God can

also bring things into our lives as correction. But it is never *pure retaliation* with no correction whatsoever.

So, perhaps this is what Paul had in mind when he wrote, “Those who belong to Christ have nailed the desires of their sinful nature to the cross and crucified them there.” We don't really do that work. God does it. We can decide to get on board with what God is doing and have a new mindset about it ...or not! When we do, we experience that *nailing effect* and we benefit from it by saying, “I'm going to believe that it's all been done for me.” So that's our sense of “nailing our sin to the cross.” God's not saying, “You're going to earn salvation by nailing your sin to the cross.” We can't do that. Our part is only in recognizing that God's done it for us.

Here is what *should* then happen, according to Paul. **Since we live by the Spirit, let's follow the Spirit's leading in every area of our lives.** Follow the Spirit's leading right down to the smallest detail! When we believe the Good News about Jesus and give it all to him (the best we can), he's going to manage every part of our lives as he lives in us. Even when we step out of line, he's going to help bring us back.

But do we let the spirit lead us? Mostly, except when we don't, except when we get mad, lonely or proud. But that's when we need the Spirit the most! Ideally, we're living by the Spirit, and we follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives. That would, indeed, be ideal. But it doesn't always happen that way. However, the more we trust God the better it's going to go for us every day. Again, when we trust God and follow the leading of his Spirit, we're not *earning* anything with God. He doesn't say, “Oh, good. You have faith. Now I'm going to be nice to you and love you.” He just says, “Welcome home, child. Welcome home! Welcome to a better, more peaceful, joyous life, even amid trouble.”

## ***Let us not become conceited (5.26)***

Paul leaves his readers with one important caution as he completes Galatians Five. **Let's not become conceited, provoke each other, or be jealous of one another.** I think he adds this because this can easily emerge in our thinking and lives. We might start thinking, "Hey, I'm living it. I'm producing the fruit of the Spirit. Look at me!" So, Paul is warning us that we don't need to go there because as soon as we do we've slipped back into the deeds of the flesh (of our old person) that Jesus came to free us from. It's like Benjamin Franklin who once told about listing all the good character qualities he'd been working on. He had a long list, and one of them was *humility*. But then he realized that the problem was that he was becoming prideful about his humility and had to scratch it off his list!

We can be kinda like that. We experience this fruit of the Spirit, it's so wonderful, and then we start getting a little bit uppity and conceited, and then we start provoking others or being jealous of others because they seem to have a little more *fruit* than we do. But we need not do this! We can just stay in that realm where we've nailed sin to the cross, where God's taking care of it, and we're living in the Spirit. That's a great place to be, and if we slip out of it (which we will occasionally), we will slip less and less as we get older and walk more with God. If you slip and fall, just pick yourself up and say, "Hey God, I'm back!" And he will say, "I know you are, I was there all the time, and I actually helped you to get up!"

Hopefully, this is all good "commentary" on what Paul's saying here in Galatians, about what the Good News is, and how we are, hopefully, *never going back* under the law... any law! Now, on to Galatians Six.

## 16. Go Live It! (Galatians 6.1-8)

We're now starting Galatians Six, and this is the final part of Paul's letter. In this letter, Paul starts out with a warning about false Good News messages (gospels). But he doesn't tell his readers just what this Good News is – not at the beginning of his letter, anyway. However, he spends the rest of the letter explaining exactly what it is – and what it is not – often using illustrations and examples. He will do more of this here in Galatians Six.

He warned about how anyone spreading these falsehoods are to be *cursed* by God! But that doesn't mean they're going to be cursed, like in the movies where they put a curse on someone or stick pins in a doll to cause harm to them. Instead, it is God declaring any such person to be unfit, inaccurate, untruthful, and in need of being corrected. And so, it's a serious thing but it's not an act by God of condemning people to hell, forever.

Paul comes right out at the beginning of his letter and says, “Even if me, or an angel from heaven, or anybody else brings you a different Good News message than the one I already gave you from the beginning (and the one you also received), reject it and reject them!” His point is that the *genuine* Good News has already been established. Then he spends the rest of the letter explaining what this correct, accurate, true Good News message is. It basically comes down to the difference between law and grace,



and that salvation by God is something he does by grace –favor from him that is totally unmerited by any of us.

God does all needed saving work, completely and totally. When we try to get under any kind of law, try to keep the Ten Commandments (good as they are), or try to even keep laws written by men ... we will fail every time! We can never be in a right relationship with God in that way, and we can't even depend on our act of faith, believing in God or Jesus, to get God to love us and forgive us. He's already done that, and the cross of Christ is proof.

Even if we try to let our act of believing be the one thing that *exempts* us from God doing something horrible to us someday in eternity, we're still working for our salvation. We're still depending on ourselves to keep some law, to believe enough, or to believe the right things. All of this is really just us *working* for our salvation. Grace, on the other hand, is God doing it all for us, rendering our belief to be no more than just acknowledging what God has *already* done for us. All we can say is, "Wow, I understand what you did for me. Thank you! I'm going to believe this." But there's no earning in our belief. I think this is the distinction that Paul makes in his letter.

### ***Overcome by sin (6.1a)***

Paul starts Galatians Six with, **Dear brothers and sisters, if a fellow believer is consumed by some sin, those of you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person get back on the right path.** I don't see anything here about forcing anyone. But some people try, and even if they could force others back by bringing some kind of rule or law down on them and controlling their life – maybe *intervening* in some way – even if they succeed and it helps for a while, eventually they've got to release them and let them decide on their own how to live. So, we need

to *let them* all along the way! People need to decide to do what's right, simply because it's the *right* thing to do and it's what they *want* to do. For them to ever be truly successful, they have to choose to walk with God, not because they're being forced.

This is the weakness of the law. The law, as Paul said earlier, guards us to some degree. It brings a limited amount of protection from wrongdoing, but it's for the wrong reason. Fear is our motive when we keep a law or requirement, not love. Elsewhere in his letters, Paul calls the law a *schoolmaster*. It's a strict one. It's something that keeps us in line. But it also makes us want to bust out, and many times people do – even believers, even pastors! In Paul's letter to the Romans, he wrote, "When the law said, 'Don't covet,' it made me want to covet all the more!" The law is only a guardian (and a poor one) until grace comes. If we really get into religion, become afraid of going to hell, worry about what our friends think, and experience a lot of guilt and shame ... we might just, maybe, live more morally. But that's the best we can do.

So, the law is helpful, but only to a limited degree. That's not how God wants it to be. He wants us to be free to do what's right. But when we're free, we can also choose to do what's wrong and then we're not free. We've lost our freedom. This can and does happen. God gives us a lot of freedom. Notice he doesn't go around controlling everybody. Look at how sinful the world is. Sometimes I wish he *would* control evil more. But I do not possess his wisdom, so I defer all of life's decisions to him. He's the Creator and it's his world.

But clearly, God allows a lot of stuff to happen. I wish he didn't allow child abuse, rape, or sex trafficking. I wish he would stop it all, now! But he doesn't. Instead, he allows it and has some ultimate good purpose in allowing it – or else he, himself, is evil (or doesn't exist)! The reason I stay sane in this crazy life is that I believe someday, in eternity, everything is going to be reconciled to God – everybody and everything, even all this crap that

happens – everything is going to be made right, and true justice (making things right) will be done.

## ***The meaning of justice***

Keep in mind that the word justice (in Greek) means “to make things right.” It does not mean, “to retaliate against someone in vengeance to even the score!” Everyone who has sinned – and we have all sinned against God and each other – is going to be forgiven, realize grace, and as a result, forgive each other. Otherwise, if we hold the other view – that God's going to punish sin eternally as pure retaliation with no correction in mind – then God just keeps things wrong, forever! In fact, he makes things worse because now all these bad people are being tormented forever, stay angry and sinful, and are never changed, redeemed, and restored. These things were God's original plan for humanity.

This is why it's a good thing that I'm not God because I would do it all wrong in my misguided zeal to fix everything. I would try to fix everything, now, and it wouldn't really get fixed in the right way! I'd mess it up. So, you don't want me (or anyone else) to be God. Therefore, I just let God have his timing. And that timing includes eternity where things can be made completely right, reconciled, and perfected. That's where my hope lies, not in this fallen world.

The book *The Shack* deals with the most difficult situation possible – the kidnapping, abuse, and murder of an innocent child. I learned two things from this book. First, God does his best work in the *shack* (worst times) of our lives. Second, if I can trust God in the *worst* things in life, then I can trust him with *anything* in life. God's whole purpose and goal is to make everything right ... eventually. It's not to keep things wrong or make them worse. If things have to be wrong for a season in order

for things to ultimately be right, then that's what God's going do, and it's the right thing to do – it's the best way possible. I need only to trust his wisdom in all things, even though it is hard sometimes to do this.

So, if we shouldn't try to force people to do what's right, how should we respond to someone who's out of line in life and struggling? Paul says, "If another believer is overcome by sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path." I think the *gentle and humble* aspect is key. We don't always want to do it this way and it can take a long time. Waiting can make us impatient. However, not giving up on people doesn't mean we spend all our time trying to help them. When someone is not willing to work on solving their problems it's OK to say, "I'll help you, but I have some conditions." It might be their finances, it might be their behavior, or it might be something else. But if they do not want to do what is needed, it's OK to give them time and space. God sure does! However, placing conditions on their behavior in for us to *help* them does not mean we've placed conditions on our *love* for them! We can still love them and say, "We'll keep talking, and when you're ready to do what needs to be done, let me know. I'm here for you." I think that's how God operates, too!

### ***Be careful not to fall (6.1b)***

Paul then gives a warning, and it's a good one. **And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself.** If you're going to help people, start hanging around their friends, and see what's going on just to find out how bad it is, you might get pulled into it in some way. So, Paul gives some caution about how to help people. If people spend too much time going into graphic detail about all their sins, we are wise to stop them and say, "I

don't need to know all the details. Just tell me what it is. If you've been robbing banks, unfaithful to your spouse, or whatever, I don't need to hear all the details so that you can prove how bad it is. I don't even want that stuff in my mind, okay?" However, to some degree, people need to verbalize what their sin is, confess it, deal with it, and think it through. Ignoring this need is the other extreme. It's a careful balance. Some people can handle hearing about sin more than others, and it's different for everyone. Know your limit.

We need to listen to people, whatever's in their hearts, whatever they need to say, without judging them. But we cannot become attached to the outcome because once people go and deal with God concerning their problems, we should not allow their worry to become our worry. Trust them alone with God. Their problems are not ours to solve, but theirs. We have our own and that is more than enough. But don't abandon them, either,

Often, we have two tendencies – either to get completely out of a situation and not help them at all, or to get sucked in, become co-dependent, and take on more than we should. Keep in mind that sometimes it's just not their time ... not yet anyway. They may have to go ahead and experience a few bad things before they are ready. This may even take a year or two until they say, "I get it, now. I'm ready to let God solve my problems by his grace, through his Spirit." God allows that same freedom in us, too, until we're ready. If we get sucked into people's problems, then we're not the stronger ones in Christ anymore. So, we need to be strong, but caring and loving. There's a balance to be found.

The other reason I cut people off from talking too long about their sin is that they're *rehearsing* it, and they're getting in deeper and deeper. So, I usually give them about ten minutes to tell me all about it. But then I say, "OK, you've expressed it, you've shared it, and I get it. I'm sorry you have to go through this, and I feel for you. But now let's turn to the solution." So, there's a

limit. It doesn't have to be exactly ten minutes, but there needs to be a time limit on how long they are allowed to dwell on, and wallow in their problems. If they don't agree, they'll be looking for somebody else to rehearse their sins with. I just let them go, pray for them, tell them I love them, continue being their friend, and stay available.

These are tough things to learn when helping other people. I used to get pulled into situations and I had to learn how to help others effectively. God taught me a lot, and it took a long time.

### ***Share each other's burdens (6.2)***

But in contrast to his warning, Paul goes on and says, **Share each other's burdens. In this way** (in this action of sharing other people's burdens), **you are obeying the law of Christ.** Isn't that interesting? By sharing somebody's burdens, you're being obedient to Christ in a very real, effective, and important way. Obeying Christ isn't just staying out of trouble. Sometimes it's sharing other people's burdens and taking them on in a way that they understand that you're with them and that you care. It tells them you're going to be there for them and that you genuinely love them. However, this kind of *sharing their burden* is not taking on their sin or being weighed down by it.

Paul continues and says, **If you think you are just too important to help someone else, you're only fooling yourself. You're not that important!** For some people, it's easy to think, "I'm not gonna help that person. They're just a homeless person, or they're too immoral, or they're too selfish. They're not worthy of my time." It is easy to look down on people, condescend them, and think they are not worthy of our valuable time. But Paul's saying, "Hey, don't think you're too important to help and spend time with certain people and to invest in them."

It seems to come down to time and money. Time is more precious than money. If you have a lot of money, you can just throw it toward a problem and be done with it. That's easy. But everybody gets 24 hours a day. The richest and poorest person in the world both have 24 hours a day to do things. So, sharing your time and spending time with someone really makes a huge statement to them. That's how they know we really care. "You're not that important," says Paul; and he's right; we're not ... compared to God. Before him we are all on the same level. So, go ahead and spend time with people when you are tempted to think they aren't as good as you.

### ***Pay careful attention (6.4)***

Here is more good advice from Paul. **Pay careful attention to your own work for God. Only then you will get the satisfaction of a job well done. You won't need to compare yourself to anyone else. We are each responsible for our own behavior.** And that's kind of the bottom line, isn't it? I see people out there trying to help others. Sometimes, it is a group of people trying to help one person, and there's a tendency to try to control them somewhat. Now, if the person voluntarily wants to be under control and under supervision, that's okay. Maybe they need that, temporarily. But the bottom line is that we're each responsible for our own conduct. At some point, you've got to say, "Friend, I love you. I will be here for you. But you must decide, one way or the other, about this. I can't decide it for you (and I shouldn't), and I can't force you to do what you know is right." Maybe we can force someone for a couple of weeks to help them break a bad habit or something. If they allow it, we can *require* them to do (or not do) something. But we can't require it without their wanting it. Usually, the best we can do is strongly recommend it, and say, "This is what I require in order for me to help you."

However, at some point, they have to take the *training wheels* off and discover how to walk in the Spirit for themselves. I wish I could bottle up God's Spirit and sell it, or give it away, and all they'd have to do is drink it – then suddenly, they'd have the Spirit! But it doesn't work that way. We all have to learn; we all have to *experience* our way to success. It comes over time, and it sometimes comes and goes. Oh, but the joy, peace, and enjoyment of walking with God ... I wish I could just freely deliver it to everyone, but I can't. All I can do is tell them about it, encourage them, be there for them, genuinely love them, and wait for God to work.

It's a matter of God's timing. But it's also a matter of *their* timing – the timing of each person, because each person has their own timing of when they're ready. God doesn't force them to get into something until they're ready to do it. He takes his time to do it right so that they won't be as apt to go back to the place they came out of. Hopefully, when they come around, they will say, "I'm *never going back!*"

## ***Provide for teachers (6.6)***

Now, this is one of the few places where Paul makes an issue of supporting someone in ministry. **Those who are taught the word of God should provide for those who teach them. They should share all good things with them.** OK! Send in your money, folks! Hey, we're all teaching and ministering to each other, so we can send each other money! All joking aside, there is a legitimate aspect of supporting those who lead and teach. I have never taken any money for teaching, but I never needed to and did not want to. Paul stayed away from it, too, by working on the side as a tent maker. I think Paul knew all the perils of taking in money and all the strings that tend to get attached to it. No one



owned Paul, and he did not depend on anyone, financially. So, he was always free to give out the truth, uncompromised.

But I think he's just saying here that there are people within the faith community who teach, are pastors, or have administrative and leading gifts, and it is proper to help provide for them. Consider those who are in leadership or serving you. How can you take the burden off them and help them serve better and more effectively? Paul was just floating this idea for his readers to consider, even though he seemed to never take a penny for himself.

### ***We reap what we sow (6.7)***

Then Paul gets back to exhorting his readers about how they live. **Don't be misled. You cannot mock God's justice.** The *justice of God* is a big and important topic. But I don't think he's saying (the way many people read it), "Don't be misled about what God is going to do to you, eternally punishing you as a result of his *justice*, if you make fun of him and don't believe in him!" However, even though this is not Paul's meaning, this is still a serious warning from him.

What Paul says next tells us more of what he means. **You will always harvest whatever you plant. Those who only live to satisfy their sinful nature will reap decay and death.** So, he is clearly saying that the *justice* of God is really something embedded in life itself. When you do what's wrong and you seek wrong things, you are making a mockery of the justice that God has built into life. Getting back out of life what we put into it is something everyone experiences and understands. What we get back because of our wrongdoing will not be God wailing on us someday in eternity (though there are many who want you to think this is so.) It's life that wails on us. Right? Life's going to do

it to us. This is Paul's warning. Destruction, decay, and death await those who poorly invest in this life. Nothing in the sense of eternal consequences is even suggested. God doesn't need to add something horrific to the consequences that come naturally in life. In fact, just the opposite. He wants to rescue us from all this nonsense in life that we get ourselves into!

So, the justice of God (in this case) is what results from life itself. We "reap what we sow," is how the King James Bible expresses it. But this aspect of justice is only part of God's overall justice – which is to "make things right" in our lives. That's what the word justice means in Greek. It does not mean to *retaliate*, get back at someone, or *even the score* (as we often use the word today).

If God stopped all sin from happening, and never let any consequences come as a result of our sin, we'd never discover our need for him and never discover what grace is. We would never appreciate it. So, in this way, justice is always a good work by God, even when he allows it to be a harsh experience. There's great wisdom in what God allows and in what he's doing. I learned about ten years ago that God's going to, eventually, make everything right and that I don't have to live with a God who's a monstrous, retaliating being planning to do horrible things to people with no corrective purpose! When I believed what I was told for the first sixty years of my life – that some things are never going to be made right by God – it was a horrible burden to live with. But now I live with a God who works everything completely and perfectly (though I don't fully understand his timing and why). However, I know that eventually, he's going to succeed at what he set out to do, which was to save the world, and will never give up on anyone until all are saved and reconciled to himself.

"He came to save the world, not condemn it," wrote John in chapter three of his Gospel, and eventually that's what he's going to do. This fact, presented throughout the New Testament, makes all the difference in the world. It's seeing everything through the lens of love and knowing that "love never fails." It

can't! It's impossible for love to ever fail. Therefore, God will never fail.

This is why Paul said, "Those who live to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature." It's not going to be pretty. It may not end well for them in this life – and for many, it does not. But it will, eventually, end well with God and this is what salvation by grace (and not by works) is all about.

In stark contrast, Paul adds this, **But those who live to please God's Spirit will gain eternal life from the Spirit.** Now, the word *eternal* does not mean "everlasting" in Greek, even though some translations stick that word in there to prop up the theological position they bring with them as a translator. It's the word "indefinite time period." And so, it's, literally, "indefinite time-period life," not *everlasting* or even *eternal* life. Actually, the word *eternal* is OK to use, if it is seen as something that has to do with *orientation* and not *duration*. *Eternal* life (when this Greek word is used) means "life that's associated with, and oriented in, eternal things," life associated with God, not just in the future but also now!

So, those who live in the Spirit, harvest life that is oriented in God and in eternal things. Yes, it will be *everlasting life*, but that's not the point he's making here, nor is it the meaning of the Greek word used that is often translated as *eternal*.

## 17. Because of the Cross (Galatians 6.9-18)

### *Tired of doing good (6.9)*

As a result of all Paul has said by way of warning, he concludes, **So never get tired of doing what is good.** Don't get tired of it, but we do sometimes. When we do, it can lead us to an unhappy and selfish life. My childhood pastor said from the pulpit, countless times, "Do what's right, till the stars fall from the sky, do what's right." Pretty simple and profound!

Paul goes on and adds, **At Just the right time, We will all reap a harvest of blessing from God; that is, if we don't give up.** There's that *timing* thing again. God's timing in our lives, at just the right time, will be the best timing for us. However, when things happen, we often think it's too soon or too late. But it really isn't. What's important is that we don't give up and instead, we keep on trusting God even when it's hard. Perhaps ... *especially* when it's hard!

We always come out better when we wait, as long as we are waiting for the right reason. Waiting on God when we know we should, is the right reason. Waiting because we don't want to do what we know is right – that's the wrong reason. But even if we blow it, we get something out of it. This is true even if we get ourselves in trouble because God is so much bigger than any trouble that we get ourselves into. Sometimes we forget how bad

and miserable trouble can be simply because we've become lazy, complacent, or bored in life. We cross the line a little and then we realize, "Oh, I forgot how bad and uncomfortable trouble is. I don't want to live like this!" So, we go back to God and he always, lovingly accepts us. But he always asks, "What did you learn?" This is when life becomes a learning moment, and it's what life is all about.

This is why Paul said, "At just the right time (sometime in the future) we will reap the harvest of blessing ... if we don't give up." What you are going through might be a blessing in your life, or you might see a blessing in somebody else's life. Then again, you might not see any purpose at all. But by faith, we can know God is at work. If he's not, then this whole life is a waste of time and we're on our own!

### ***Do good to everyone (6.10)***

Paul then uses one of his famous "therefore" connectors to tie in what he's about to say with what he's already said. **Therefore, whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone – especially to those who are in the family of faith.** We should always do good to *everyone* ... and sometimes that is hard because some people can be really difficult. Still, Paul says *everyone*. Perhaps he had in mind the words of Jesus, "love your enemies and pray for them." Then he further qualifies this by saying that fellow believers should have a special place in our thinking when we set out to do good to others. It's all about not being a selfish person.

Some kind of extreme is not what Paul is talking about here. He is presenting a careful balance. It's not a matter of, "Hey, we're just going to take care of our fellow believers, and if we get around to it we will help others, too." I think Paul's reasoning is that if we build up and help people of faith, first (but not exclusively),

then the overall building of the kingdom of God is going to go a lot better. We'll be ready and able if we solidly have each other on our side. So, it's really for the good of everybody that we do good to fellow believers in a special way, never forgetting to always do good to everyone.

Keep in mind that the negative aspect of this also applies. If we're *not* doing good to those who are in the family of faith, and we're fighting each other, calling each other heretics and false teachers, and kicking each other out of churches ... we're wasting time and energy, and we can't be *salt* and *seasoning* to the world. It is our joy and privilege to represent Christ in kindness and by doing good. Any of us can easily become "annoying religious people" who reinforce all the negative stereotypes that we, sometimes, so richly deserve.

Religious people can be really annoying, they don't even get it. They think because people are rejecting them that it proves that such people are all godless, rebellious, and deserve to go to hell forever. The thinking sometimes is, "Oh, those dirty rotten sinners, they don't go to church, they're way off base, and they need to repent and be just like us!" Keep in mind that only *some* people think this way, not everyone who attends church does. But it takes only a few to create a negative stereotype that prevails. Usually, religious folks like this don't realize that they are (at least partly) the cause of why other people are running away from God. They sometimes chase them away by their self-righteous words and behavior, and lack of love. "So do good to everyone," says Paul, "but in a special way to those who are in the family of faith," that is, fellow believers.

## ***Large Letters (6.11)***

Paul begins the end of his letter with, **Notice what large letters I am using to write these closing words. This is my**

**own handwriting.** This is one thing that has brought about speculation that Paul's eyesight wasn't working well, and that this might have been the *thorn in the flesh* he talks about in his second letter to the Corinthians. So, he writes these big letters, P-A-U-L. He's putting his own signature on this letter because he probably had a scribe writing it all down for him. He says, "Hey, let me put my own signature on this letter so you will know it's me."

### ***Those trying to force you (6.12)***

Oh, but Paul is not quite done. So, he adds a few final thoughts. **Those who are trying to force you to be circumcised – they just want to look good to others.** Ha! Paul can't seem to let go of his heart-felt theme, even when he tries to end his letter! In case his readers don't get his main concern, he restates it one more time. But perhaps this is just Paul summing up all he has written in this letter. He identifies the true motive of those who fooled the Galatians into giving up their freedom and going back under the rules and regulations of the law. Their motive is all about looking good before others. Don't think this doesn't still happen today. Always look for the motives (without unfairly judging) that are driving those who want you to do something, join them, or change your life in some way. Many times their motives are good, but not always. As they say ... "follow the money." But I would add, "follow the power and prestige," too.

For Paul the main issue of the law was about the requirement of *circumcision*, which was the big ritual of that day. But his objection can be applied to *anything* someone requires you to do for the wrong reason. He has spent most of his letter explaining and giving examples of what those wrong reasons are. If someone tells you to not take your coffee into the sanctuary, they

have every right to require that. But when it comes to your *spiritual* life, it needs to be “hands off.”

Paul continues his final thoughts with, **They don't want to be persecuted for teaching (as I do) that only the cross of Christ saves. Even those who push circumcision don't keep the whole law. They only want others to be circumcised so they can boast about it and claim them as disciples.** This exposes the ulterior motives that can be in any ministry, and this can happen to anybody. Ill motives can start with being a counselor, a friend, a person teaching a class, or anything else. But it's easy for them to start getting proud of all the people they're influencing and helping (which are good things, in and of themselves). But, if not careful and not seeking genuine humility, it can become a *boast* about having many disciples when they all belong to God.

### ***Boasting about the cross (6.14a)***

Paul gives positive closing remarks from here on out. **As for me, I never want to boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.** And for Paul, this was the bottom line. He says, “Look, I boast in Jesus and his cross, not in myself, not in what I do, and not in rituals (like circumcision).” He always points to Christ on the cross and the work of the Holy Spirit in his life. He learned this the hard way. I think God worked on him for decades *before* he was converted, and almost two decades *after* his conversion. That's how long God spent preparing Paul before he turned him loose and had him write letters, teach, and travel on missionary journeys. How long has it taken (or will it take) for God to prepare you for what he wants you to do? What he has for you probably won't be something fancy or well-known, as it was for Paul. God loves to and usually works through ordinary



lives! That might be where God does his greatest work. God could have prepared ten, a hundred, or a thousand *Pauls*. But he didn't. He only needed one Paul to demonstrate that even the worst sinner of that day was an object of God's love and grace. God really didn't even need him! So, this is what Paul's message was all about ... salvation *by grace through* faith. God does a lot of preparation in people's lives and that's true of us, too. We've all been prepared for whatever we're doing and will be doing in the future.

### ***Because of that cross (6.14b)***

And so, Paul claimed to only boast (brag) about who he was in Jesus, because of him and his cross. **Because of that cross, any interest I once held in this world has been crucified. And the world's interest in me has also died. So, It doesn't matter whether we have been circumcised or not.** Wow, that's a good way to live life. It doesn't mean we don't go camping, or listen to good music, or go to Disneyland, or go to the pub and have a beer. It doesn't mean we don't live in this world, but it does mean we've realized that what really counts is who God is and who Jesus is, and then everything else fits into that.

We are free to do anything we want ... if it's not sinful and self-destructive. This includes most things in life! God has designed life to be full of interesting and creative things with great diversity for us to enjoy and thank him for. So, go do them and take God with you so that they will be enjoyed to the fullest! When we walk with God things don't get as much out of place and out of priority. With God, now you can truly enjoy life. Paul knew this and wanted everyone to be free from all bondage in their spiritual life. This is the realm where we experience *real* freedom. How many people are trying to enjoy life, but their life is out of balance, and things that should be good – maybe having

a glass of wine, or a relationship with somebody, or making money – are just not going well. Or maybe they live on the ragged edge, running around in a vicious circle. There's nothing wrong with making money, even a lot of it, but it can become obsessive and dominate your life. All these good things can turn into wrong things, even though they were meant to be good. Life is meant to be enjoyed. So, if we've got "Christ and Him crucified" at the very center of our lives, then everything is seen in the proper perspective, and life's going to go well for us.

Well, I guess this is Paul's grand conclusion. **What counts is whether or not we are transformed into being a new creation in Christ.** Yes, indeed, that is what counts! Everything flows out of that. That can't happen if we are still bound to some law by man, or even by God – that's not grace!

### ***Mercy be upon all (6.16)***

Like at the end of many church services today, Paul finalizes his letter with a blessing on his readers. Oh, maybe the churches got their idea from Paul! Ha! **May God's peace and mercy be upon all who live by these principles because they are the new people of God. From now on, don't let anyone bother me with these things. I bear on my body many scars that prove I belong to Jesus.** Paul had many physical scars. He was whipped and it was *forty minus one* lashes (39) because they knew exactly how many they could give him before he might die. He got close to death several times. Once, he was stoned and left for dead, and another time, he was shipwrecked. (See the Book of Acts for that story and others). So, he literally had the scars on his body. That was all part of the preparation that God had for him.

Paul's final words of his letter are, **Dear brothers and sisters, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.** Although he says, "May it happen," I don't think he's saying, "Well, maybe, I hope it happens." Instead, I think he's saying, "I expect this grace thing to happen because it is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that is involved." Don't forget, there's a little bit of responsibility on our part. God's grace is always there, but will we receive it? Will we get on board with him? Will we engage with him by faith and walk with him daily? The New Testament writings are full of warnings, many from Paul, and if we heed them, we will do well in life. That's why they are warnings, and they are given in love, but seriously so. Heeding warnings does not earn us anything, it just keeps us out of trouble. These warnings are certainly not threats, as some religious people make them out to be. God does not need to threaten people, nor does he want to. But he does want to give it to us straight so that we can live a more joyous, stress-free, peaceful life (to the degree that life can be lived in this crazy world). God knows that will only happen when we know him!

Grace is always with us. How could it not be? But there is a principle of the "renewing of our mind," that Paul speaks of in Romans Twelve. That's where the problem is – with us, not with God. It's also not with God's grace. Grace is always there. It's our mind and our heart that needs to be renewed. God allows this process to go on, but always with him overseeing it and making sure that we will all, eventually, end up in the right place – with him. Forever! So good to know. The changing of our mind usually happens slowly, although occasionally we experience some quick growth. We've all grown and other people are growing, too. They may be younger physically, or younger in the Lord, but they are getting there. And that's okay. We don't have to hurry them or hurry ourselves.

I think it is safe to say that we can appreciate grace more and more every day. The freedom that we have in Christ, once we experience it, is unbelievable! Well, it is believable and this is what having faith is all about. But we get there when we get there. No worry. And when we do, we're *home!* We want other people to come home, too, but sometimes they're not ready. That's okay. We just need to keep on loving them and gently remind them of the Good News about who Jesus is and what he did. Sometimes this means shutting up and being a faithful friend. We don't have to talk them into anything. We can't! Just say, "I love you," and let them see it in your life.

We complicate the beauty of faith, which is based on God's grace, by trying to earn something with God. We can't. He requires nothing of us. He just wants us to trust him and enjoy a wonderful relationship with him. It's actually simple, though it is sometimes not easy. We tend to make it hard by getting in the way. Just rest in who God is. And there are always people who help us complicate it ... if we let them. But really, it's simple. What did Paul call it? The *simplicity* of the gospel, the *simplicity* of knowing Christ and him crucified. That's it! Paul gives a lot of other information in his thirteen New Testament letters, but his bottom line is the simplicity of the Good News message about Jesus and what he did for us on the cross. The rest is just additional information and explanation that is helpful to us.

After 40 years of reading Systematic Theology and studying the Bible carefully, I've reduced my "doctrinal statement," my "creed," down to just three items. God loves me. I love him. And I need to love others! That's it. I don't really need anything else. For me, this sums it all up. Hey, it looks like I got this from Jesus! He said, "Love God and love others, and you'll fulfill the whole law." So, it really is simple. We tend to over-complicate everything, and we let other people complicate things for us. Sometimes this is how they gain power over us. God and Jesus

operate differently. We sometimes become convinced we're supposed to worry about all the things we don't know, try to figure everything out, strive for this and that, and do all the things we think we gotta do. But we don't. Sure, it's OK to do things and stay busy. That's life. But it's *why* we are doing them that counts.

Do we need go back under some law or requirement to try to earn something with God? That was Paul's concern about the Galatians. That's always the big difference in Paul's letters – law versus grace. If we ever get our minds around this and realize the implications of it, our lives will totally change. We are free! We're never going back!

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