

INTRODUCTION

This morning, I’m starting a series on Galatians and I’m excited about what we’re going to learn over the next twelve months. When you get the truth of Galatians, you’ll have a personal grace awakening. That’s why I’ve entitled the series, “Don’t Stray from the Grace-Way.”

This is a true story. Cliff started working at a barbeque restaurant; his job was to do anything the boss told him. One busy Friday night as Cliff was clearing off tables; the boss ran out and said, “Cliff, we’re in trouble. We’re out of quarters and customers are waiting.” He handed him two twenty-dollar bills and said, “Go next door and get \$40 worth.” Cliff ran to the gas station next door, but the cashier said she wasn’t allowed to give out that much change. He sprinted to a nearby bank, but it was closed. Next he ran into a convenience store; and the clerk took pity on him and gave him four rolls of quarters.

Twenty minutes after he left he ran back into the restaurant and handed his boss the coin rolls to his boss. His boss asked, “Where are the quarters?” Out of breathe, Cliff said, “Right here.” The boss looked at him with a mixture of frustration and humor and said, “I meant chicken quarters—we are out of chicken quarters!”

Obviously, Cliff and his boss had a misunderstanding of the meaning of “quarters.” Grace is the same way. Everyone knows and loves the song, “Amazing Grace” but not everyone truly understands what grace really is.

Last week we remembered the 9/11, one of the darkest chapters in American history. But it pales in comparison to the darkest chapter of all in our history: The Civil War. More Americans died in the Civil War than in WWI and WWII combined. When I taught history as an adjunct professor in Birmingham, I said the Civil War was fought over the tense of a verb. The North said, “The United States IS” (meaning authority was found in the one union) and the South said, “The United States ARE” (meaning each state maintained their own authority). The social and moral issue that ignited this war was slavery. In the middle of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln made a daring proclamation announcing the freedom of the slaves, the Emancipation Proclamation.

The Emancipation Proclamation said in part: “That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free...And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God. In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed. President Abraham Lincoln.

After this proclamation, headlines around the nation read, “Slavery Legally Abolished.” Galatians is a letter that announces “Religious Legalism Abolished.” It is our Emancipation Proclamation. Over the next few months, we’re going to learn about the freedom that we find in the gospel of God’s amazing grace.

Galatians 1:1-6. "Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— and all the brothers with me, to the churches in Galatia [in the area of Turkey today]: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—"

Galatians is Paul's earliest letter and when you read the first few verses it's obvious Paul was furious, because some false teachers had come into the churches and taught the new believers that salvation came by keeping religious rules and following religious rituals. This letter is different than any other, because Paul doesn't have any courteous remarks like we find in the opening of the letter to the Philippians when he wrote, "I thank my God every time I remember you." Instead, Paul jumps right in to the problem of how they had turned from grace to a different gospel.

Galatians is a short book—only six chapters. You can easily read it in a half-hour. But don't be deceived by its size. A tiny stick of dynamite can blow up a big building. That's more than a figure of speech; it's a metaphor for the book itself. Galatians is spiritual dynamite. The great Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe wrote: "The Galatian letter is not a book to be taken lightly. Galatians was Martin Luther's charter of liberty during the Reformation. Luther's writings, in turn, brought the truth of salvation by faith to John Wesley's heart in the meeting at Aldersgate Street in London. It was Wesley whom God used in such a remarkable way to spearhead revival in the British Isles, leading eventually to the founding of the Methodist Church. And that revival positively affected the entire English-speaking world. As we study Galatians, we are participating in a tremendous spiritual chain reaction that even today could result in another revival." (*Be Free*, page 22.)

If there's anything America needs right now, it is a mighty spiritual awakening. During a flight, an airline pilot said over the intercom, "Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain speaking. I have good news and bad news. The bad news is that our navigational equipment is broken and we don't know where we are or where we're going. But the good news is that we have a nice tailwind, and we're making excellent time."

That's an apt description of our culture. People are moving faster than ever before, but they have no idea of where they're going. Galatians answers the age-old question: How can I find real meaning in life? There are three ways people answer this question. Let's examine these three attempts.

1. LEGALISM: Keep the rules!

Some people have turned to a religious system of keeping rules to find meaning in life. For them life is all about keeping rules to please God. This is called religious legalism.

It wasn't long after Paul started preaching the gospel and Gentiles turned to Christ that legalism

raised its ugly head. We read about it in Acts 15:1-2. "Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.' This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them."

There was a dangerous movement in the early church to make Christians just a branch of the Jewish faith. These Jewish "believers" insisted anyone who wanted to be a Christian must do MORE than believe. They had to follow the Jewish law. Since almost all the early Christians were practicing Jews, this wasn't a real problem. But when thousands of Gentiles started coming to Christ, it created a real crisis. These legalists insisted men who became Christians, no matter what their age, had to undergo the painful surgery of circumcision. They demanded the only way a person could become a Christian was to FIRST become a good Jew, obeying all the Old Testament laws, then they could say they also followed Jesus.

Legalism teaches that Jesus plus good works equals salvation. The problem with legalism is that it sets up an impossible standard. None of us can keep all the rules all the time.

I haven't had a speeding ticket in many years, but I several years ago I was driving back from a long trip and just a few miles from home I was exceeding the speed limit. I looked in the rearview mirror and saw that sight that makes all of us sick. It was a State Trooper on my bumper with his lights flashing. I pulled over and he came up and said, "Do you know how fast you were going?" I said, "I don't know exactly, but I'm sure it was over the speed limit." Then I thought I'd try to appeal to his sense of fairness. I said, "Officer, I've been driving eight hours today, and I've been under the speed limit for the entire trip until just a few minutes ago." So how do you think that turned out? Right ... I got a ticket, because I was guilty, so I paid the fine. That's the problem with legalism. There is no room for error—and all of us make errors every day.

A legalist isn't just someone who believes they have to keep the rules to be saved. Most legalists are believers who believe they have to live a certain way for God for to love them more. If you look at my Facebook page you'll see I identify myself as a recovering legalist. For years I believed (and preached) that once you are saved there were things you must do if you wanted to continue to receive God's favor. I thought I had to read my Bible and pray daily if I wanted to maintain the flow of God's love and blessing in my life. I thought I had to constantly be witnessing and bringing people to Christ—and if I wasn't, I was disappointing God. Those are good things to do, but they didn't make God love me any more or any less. The second way people try to find purpose in life is:

2. HEDONISM: No rules!

Hedonism is the opposite of legalism; it is living with no boundaries. I love to eat at Outback Steakhouse. Their motto is, "No rules. Just right." That's fine when it comes to steak, but it's a terrible way to live.

Hedonism is as old as the human race. One of the earliest poems ever recorded was written 4,200 years ago and is entitled, "Egyptian Hedonism." It says: "Follow your desire as long as you shall

live. Fulfill your needs upon earth after the command of your heart. Behold, it is not given to man to take his property with him. Behold, there is not one who departs who comes back again." Let me translate that in to American: "You only go around once in life, so grab for all the gusto you can get." That's hedonism.

The strangest book in the Bible is Ecclesiastes. Solomon had wealth beyond belief, and had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. That's a total of a thousand wives. He was the one who wrote in Proverbs, "Whoever finds a wife finds a good thing." That's what I call too much of a good thing! Can you imagine having a thousand mothers-in-law? He wrote Ecclesiastes when he was old and bitter and his many wives had turned his heart from God. In eleven of the chapters he recounts the emptiness of trying to find happiness from the position of "under the sun," which means from a human perspective. Finally in the twelfth chapter he says it boils down to remembering your Creator in the days of your youth.

As Solomon reflected on his life of unrestricted pleasure he wrote: "I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure... Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 2:10-11)

When I googled "Hedonism" I discovered there is a resort with that name. The advertisement says: "Sleep in. Stay up late. Give up counting calories. Have a drink before noon. Give up mineral water. Dine in shorts. Talk to strangers. Don't make your bed. Go skinny-dipping. Don't call your mother. Let your hair down. Don't pay for anything. Don't leave a tip. Just be your beautiful self." Doesn't that sound attractive? That's because it appeals to our fleshly desires. But the Bible says in Galatians 6:8, "The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction."

3. GRACE: A relationship that sets me free!

Galatians teaches us that our purpose for living isn't about keeping rules; it's all about a relationship with Jesus. Jesus said, "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:32) The key verse in Galatians is: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)

Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation is a great parable about the freedom we have under the gospel of grace. Slaves in Texas were officially freed on January 1, 1863. But they didn't know they were free. They kept on working under the bondage of slavery for almost two more years. It wasn't until the after the end of the Civil War when Union General Gordon Granger read the Emancipation Proclamation in Galveston, Texas that the slaves in Texas realized they were free. The date he read the proclamation was June 19, 1865, and that's why African-Americans in Texas celebrate Juneteenth.

As a follower of Jesus, you have been set free by the gospel of grace. But like those slaves in Texas, millions of so-called Christians are still laboring under the idea that they have to follow

rules and rituals to be earn acceptance before God. That's the bondage of legalism. You are free, so act like it! What does it mean to be free under the gospel of grace?

(1) Freedom from guilt

Guilt is a healthy God-given emotion that shows us our need for God. The reason we feel guilty for sin is because we ARE guilty. We are sinners and need God's forgiveness. But once we have placed our sin under the blood of Jesus, He has forgiven all our sins, past, present and future. Lingered guilt over forgiven sins is a tool of the devil. In Revelation 12:10, Satan is identified as "the accuser of the brothers." He accuses us before God and he accuses us to ourselves. Satan slips up to forgiven Christians and whispers, "You're no good; you're no good; baby, you're no good."

Legalism tries to place you back under the curse of guilt, but grace sets you free. Will you accept that freedom? For three nights this last week, I preached to the offenders in the Coffield unit in Tennessee Colony. This is the maximum-security facility for the Texas Department of Corrections. We took choir members and a band. Matt Robb led the music and guys from our Sports Reach Ministry shared their testimonies.

God is up to something at Coffield. There is a strong group of Believers there and they have organized themselves into a large church, complete with a choir, and shepherds and elders. Each night I preached to about 700 offenders and we had over 100 decisions in the three services. It was a wonderful experience. Those guys are so hungry for the word that they "amened," clapped, stood up and shouted when I said something they liked. I nearly preached myself to death! It was a great experience. I told some of them I felt so at home there I was tempted to go out and steal a car (not really).

I discovered this past week that many of those men behind bars really understand and appreciate grace. They are in prison, they realize they're guilty, but they understand they have a debt to pay to society, but God forgives them. They have more freedom than many people who live on this side of the double razor wire. Sure they are under "lockdown" much of the time, but if you could look into their eyes, you would see that they have been set free where it really matters. They have been set free in their souls.

As I walked out of that prison three times this week, I wondered who was in bondage and who was really free. As I walked through the four check-points, hearing the loud buzz of the electronic lock each time, I thought, "How ironic. I'm leaving some men who are behind bars, but they are living in freedom. I'm heading back to Tyler where there are thousands of people who think they are free, but they're really living in a soul-prison and don't know it. They are in bondage to the idea that following rules and keeping the law will make them good enough and acceptable enough to earn heaven."

Are you still in bondage to guilt of sins God has forgiven? Or will can you sing with sincerity, "My chains are gone, I've been set free! My God, my Savior has ransomed me. And like a flood His mercy rains; Unending love, Amazing grace!"

(2) Freedom from fear

A legalist is afraid he hasn't done enough to please God. If one prayer is good, aren't two prayers better? And if fifty "hail Mary's is good" aren't a hundred "hail Mary's better?" If giving 10% of my income to God is good, isn't giving 20% better?

But if you understand grace, you don't have to be afraid. There are basically three ways to spell salvation: One is "D-O-N-'T." Some people believe they will go to heaven because of what they DON'T do. They've DON'T commit murder, or they DON'T rob banks. They think by refraining from doing bad things will earn their salvation; that is legalism.

The second way people spell salvation is "D-O." Other people believe Jesus Christ died on the cross for their sins, but they still think there is something for them to DO to be saved. Paul's heart was broken for the believers in Galatia because they were still trying to DO something to be right with God.

The third—and the only way—to spell salvation is: D-O-N-E. The Bible says, "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." (1 John 2:2) You say, "Now, wait a minute, pastor, are you saying I'm like a robot and God just saves me and I have no part in the transaction? Don't I choose Him?" Sure, but He chose you before you chose Him. "Don't I have to accept Jesus?" Sure, but before you ever accepted Him, He accepted *you*.

Do you want to know what our part in salvation is? Watch this book. I'm going to drop it. Gravity is going to do its part and the book is going to do its part. What did the book do? Nothing. It just dropped, because of the power of gravity. It didn't have to DO anything. Just as gravity drew the book downward, Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." (John 6:44)

(3) Freedom from doubt

Are you going to heaven when you die? There are several ways you can answer that question. You might say, "No." Or you might say, "I don't believe in heaven." That's also a "no." But other answers include, "I don't know" or "I hope so" or "I'm not sure." Would you like to be able to say, "*Absolutely*, no doubt about it, I *know* I'm going to heaven when I die?" Well, it is the gospel of grace that gives you that freedom from doubt.

Have you ever wondered what makes Christianity different from the other religions of the world? There are many differences of course, but there's a major contrast. Of all the world's religions, Christianity is the only faith that guarantees salvation to its followers.

Hindus believe salvation is finally attained through transmigration of the soul, or reincarnation. But what if you keep being reincarnated in the wrong direction? Or what if a meteorite destroys Earth during the middle of your transmigration? Too bad, there you'd be: A soul without a body floating in the universe. It's really a soul lottery, no guarantee there.

The Buddhist believes if you do everything right, think right, talk right, act right, then you can

attain karma. But you are actually judged more by your motives than your actions. So what if you die before you purify your motives? There are no make-up courses in hell.

Muslims are in the same boat of insecurity. They teach if you faithfully observe the five pillars of Islam, you'll be judged worthy. But nobody is ever certain they are good enough to please the great and mighty Allah. They can only try harder. Mohammed himself wrote, "Save yourselves from hellfire, as I cannot save you from Allah's punishment...Nor do I know what will be done with me or you..." (Sura 46:9).

I once spoke to a woman who had been sitting in a hospital with her terminally ill elderly mother. After her mother died, a hospital chaplain came by to comfort her. The chaplain, a Catholic priest, said, "I hope your mother is in heaven." My friend, who knew her mother loved the Lord said, "Oh, we know she is heaven." The chaplain said, "Well, we certainly hope so." This lady got in the face of the chaplain and said firmly but lovingly, "No, we don't have to HOPE so, we KNOW where she is. Mother's favorite scripture was, 'For I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I've committed unto him against that day.'" (2 Timothy 1:12) Rule-keepers can NEVER be sure, because they can never be sure they've done enough!

Grace gives us salvation, and then grace gives us assurance. I can see Jesus hanging on a cross. He looks at a man who has lived an awful life and is dying an awful death. This man is nailed to a cross. He can't move. He can't do any good deeds; he can only speak a simple nine-word request: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus gives Him a grace gift and a promise. In the King James Version, Jesus says, "Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:43) Did you catch that word, "verily?" The NIV translates it, "I tell you the truth..." But that's too weak. The word "verily" is actually the word "amen" which means "surely without a shadow of a doubt." Jesus was saying, "I promise! I guarantee! I assure you! Amen! Amen! Today you will be with me in paradise." Only those who are embraced by His grace can truly sing, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!"

CONCLUSION

One of the old Negro spirituals that came out of the worship music written during the time of American slavery was "Free at Last." For those slaves singing it before the Emancipation Proclamation it was song about death. They rejoiced in the death of a slave, because that was the only time a slave was truly free. In the height of the civil rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King quoted these words in his famous "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington. "Free at last! Free at last! I thank God, I'm free at last!"

I have a dream, too. I have a dream that Christians in Green Acres will shake off the shackles of legalism and rest in the Amazing Grace of our Lord Jesus. When you do, you will throw back your head and shout with joy, "Free at last! Free at last! I thank God Almighty, I'm free at last!"

OUTLINE

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"I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure...Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. *Ecclesiastes 2:10-11*

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Theme of Galatians:

- (1) Freedom from guilt
- (2) Freedom from fear
- (3) Freedom from doubt

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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes