

## Is Christianity just a bunch of rules?

Gal. 4:21-31

March 11, 2018 – Lent 4

**Big idea: Grace should be what we are known for!**

### **Just a bunch of outdated rules**

One of the criticisms of the church is that we are just a bunch of outdated rules. We should get with the picture and update our theology. Sadly some have. Many denominations call good what has been called evil for centuries. Come to our church for we have updated with the times.

Now I can see that Buddhism and Zen religions are just a bunch of rules for they give a path to their version of heaven on earth. You even sense an emphasis on rules in Muslim or Mormonism faiths. Yet is that really what the Christian church is?

If we have given that impression to the world, then we have failed them. The Christian church is about faith and grace and not rules and piety. It is about freedom in Christ not slavery to Moses. Somehow the Galatians were being pulled back to emphasize the rules.

The danger is that the rules are easy to understand even if they are impossible to keep. Faith is harder for it is a relationship with God. It is, however, the path of freedom and is possible for everyone even the most sinful people on the planet. Today we let Paul tell us why we should embrace grace, not rules.

### **Four contrasts between true faith and pious rules**

**A. Grace frees, rules enslave v.22** *For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman.*

Paul uses the Old Testament Story of Abraham and his family to show us the difference between grace and rules. The setting looks at two wives and Abraham's first two sons. Ishmael is the father of the Muslim Arabs. Isaac is the father of the Jews and of Christianity.

Paul begins by looking at how grace gives freedom and pious rules enslave us. Isaac was the child of a free woman named Sarah. Ishmael was the child of the slave woman Hagar. Hagar remained a servant even though she had born a child to Abraham. She could not change her spots.

Legalism still enslaves people. They worship the rules even though they can never keep them. They enslave themselves to guilt and to doubt. Even if the Muslim dies killing infidels, he can never be sure that he gets to the heavens. His sins and imperfections always haunt him.

Faith frees people. The Christian knows as he or she approaches death that Jesus died for them and did all that was needed for salvation. They throw themselves on the grace of God and find comfort and confidence. We put the cross at the center of the church to remind us of our freedom in Christ.

**B. Basis – Faith lives by a promise not by earthly ideas v. 23** *His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise.*

Isaac was born as God's fulfillment of a promise. At age 100, God gave him the son that had been promised 25 years earlier. It was a miracle. Ishmael was born because Abraham doubted the promise and tried to keep God's promise by his own hands. A slave woman conceived a normal child.

Faith believes in a miracle and a promise. It believes that God has given us and every other believer salvation because of a cross and resurrection that happened almost 2000 years ago. We believe in that promise and expect that our sinful bodies have been forgiven and will be in heaven.

Rules are the pagan's way of gaining favor with their gods and a place in the hereafter. Take a pilgrimage, give up drinking and dancing, or sacrifice your life for the cause. They doubt the goodness of their god and seldom talk of their god loving them. They have to beg and bargain to get into heaven.

Faith lives by the promise and expects that God has done what is necessary for our salvation. Rules are the result of those who doubt their god and feel that there must be more than a cross. There must be something that sets me apart from others so that I am worthy of salvation.

**C. Persecution – Rules bring persecution of those living by faith v.29** *At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now.*

The Old Testament records in Genesis 21 that Ishmael began to mock his little brother. Ishmael could see that even though he was older, Isaac was to inherit the bulk of the property and would be placed above him. It caused Sarah to fear that Ishmael would hurt his brother and maybe kill him.

Those who live by the rules still persecute those who try to live by faith. It was part of Paul's ministry that the Judaizers followed him and tried to undo his message every place in the province of Galatia and beyond. They persecuted him because they feared the pure grace of the gospel.

Rule centered religions and rule-centered Christians still persecute those who try to live by grace. They demand that people be perfect and keep the laws that even they can't keep perfectly. Grace is a threat for it overturns all their rules and expectations and shows that God is not angry, but filled with love.

Churches that are grace based will find persecution for the world wants salvation their way and not on the basis of what God has done for us. Rule people figure that if they have to keep the rules then everyone else should keep their man-made rules as well. They want us all in bondage, not the freedom of grace.

**D. Inheritance – Faithless Piety brings nothing v. 30** *But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son."*

A final contrast between the two is found in their inheritance. When the conflict arose between Isaac and Ishmael, Sarah wanted Ishmael thrown out and God concurred. All the inheritance belonged to Isaac and so Hagar and Ishmael were sent packing even though he was the older son.

Faith brings grace and the love of God in this life in ways that the Ishmael rule keepers of this world will never know. We have the freedom of forgiveness. Ishmael's kind are trapped in failings that they can never forget and doubts that will haunt them.

The Isaac Christians of this world will dwell in the house of their father God for their life enjoying the blessings of being part of his family and have the confidence that they will receive the Easter inheritance of heaven. The inheritance is theirs through faith.

Ishmael for all his rules will be thrown outside the kingdom. Without Jesus, they will live in fear and doubt. Without Jesus, men will claim to no avail that they were good people as they lay their cold body in the ground. Faith brings everything. Piety brings nothing when it is without God.

**The church is powerful when Grace comes first.**

**Emphasize grace and not the rules v.31** *Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.*

The greatest service the church can do is to emphasize grace and not the rules. If the world thinks that we are about the rules then we have failed them and we have failed our Lord. People will get the rules by themselves. We must give them the grace of the cross.

Paul would fight for that grace throughout the 40 or so years of his ministry. He would tell people of the love of Jesus and help them relegate the rules of the scriptures to being a response to a loving God. Gentiles didn't need to eat Kosher or be circumcised. They just needed to love and trust God.

In the same way, Churches shouldn't persecute others who don't live up to some moral code. They need to love others and live moral and decent lives so that others learn the value of a godly life. Let them see a strong marriage that living together can never match. Let them see the power of an honest tongue.

It is Christ who will teach his people and empower them to live in a way that has character so that they can have joyful and powerful lives. Rules can never succeed for they attempt to be moral without our Lord. As the church lives by and with Christ, it can show why rules are really important.

**Grace brings joy and the fruit of faith**

Let your light shine with God's grace so that this place becomes known for the love of Jesus that is found in grace. You are Isaacs and children of God. You are people of freedom in a world where everyone seems to criticize one another and hold people to some arbitrary code for life.

Your grace trumps their rules. As the people of God live by grace and not the law, they will attract others to this place. They will see your freedom and your love for one another and want to come out of the darkness into the joy that we have in Christ.

Welcome them. They will be filled with failings and doubts about themselves and about God. Share with them the freedom that you feel in Jesus so that their hearts might be lifted up. Let them see the character of Christ as a result of faith and not a way to earn salvation.

Let them have the joy that comes from having Christ as our brother and friend who helps us to succeed in life and gives us His character. Grace triumphs rules for grace opens up possibilities for your friends and family that the world cannot offer. Let them feel the joy.

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**Church at 9 PM**  
**Sunday school at 10:15**  
**Everyone is welcome**