



Paul's first defense of grace

Galatians: Rules versus Grace

Six Bible studies from Galatians

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Introduction

Paul had barely finished the first missionary journey across Asia Minor when he received a report that the Galatians were in trouble. They had been confused by a group of Jewish false teachers who taught that Paul had not given them the full story. They believed that one needed to keep all the Old Testament Law if the gospel was to be effective. For them, the gospel was only an addition. Paul is bewildered that they have traded the freedom of the gospel for a set of rules. Paul begins with a defense of his ministry and of the message that he preached to them. He wants them to see that righteousness comes from the cross and not the law. The law was created by God to be the servant of the gospel. The law leads us to the gospel and helps us to understand our need for salvation. Paul also shows how the gospel allows us to live a new life without fear or bondage to sin.

The church has battled the question of whether the cross is enough for centuries. Some churches have added penance or good deeds to the gospel. Others have demanded greater holiness to prove that one's salvation. The cross alone seems too simple for the gift of salvation. Such a holiness attitude means that we are uncomfortable with people who are less than perfect. A church based on the law becomes harsh to the broken and blind to their faults. It becomes the keeper of rules that believers must obey. God calls his church to live by the freedom of the gospel. The church is to refuse to live in fear and bondage to the rules and should live in the gospel's freedom. We want to be transformed so that we seek out the Holy Spirit and live in His power and with His values. We will be kind, loving, and patient instead of being harsh. The gospel gives us the ability to deal with others who are less than perfect in love because God has loved us.

It would seem a simple choice between the law and the gospel. Our struggle, like the one that the Galatians faced, is that the gospel offends our pride. We can't save ourselves. We must depend upon Jesus. Our joy is the power and opportunities of the new life in Jesus that the gospel presents to us. In the gospel, we can accept others who are broken and lead them to Jesus so that they can be truly healed. It is the gospel that alone can save us and open up the inheritance that God wants us to give. The law only shows us our need for the gospel by showing us the truth about our sin. Finally, it is the gospel that provides us with the power to live differently. Life will be a slice of heaven as you walk with Jesus every day of your life. You will be confident about the future and your salvation, for they depend on Jesus and not on your works. The church is not a place of perfect people living by the rules. It is filled with sinners who are growing to be more like Christ each day. The gospel has the power to make us whole in a broken world. Rules show us our brokenness.

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How to use this Bible study

Each of the six chapters contains an introduction to help you get the big picture and is followed by thirteen questions to help you dig into the truth. The questions will help you understand what is going on and apply it to your own lives. The leader's guide provides answers for the questions that can be used in a Sunday Bible class or a small group. In a small group setting, you may find it helpful to copy the four-page leader's guide for each person. There are also student guides provided in the back of the book. In a large setting, it may be easier to copy those guides so that each of the members of the class has a student guide for personal use. Notice that there are also three questions at the end of each lesson that can either be discussed as you meet together or assigned for people to think about in the coming week.

My prayer is that you and the members of your group or class can grow through these studies. The answers in the leader's guide may challenge you to find deeper meaning and application for your lives. Life as a Christian can be difficult. It becomes even more difficult as we try to actively serve our Lord in ministry. The lessons that Jesus gave to help His disciples as they began the ministry of the new church are still important for us today. They can provide strength and help with our fears. As you study, realize that many of the questions have no single answer but are meant to help people find God's help in your trials. If you need to take more than one week per lesson, do so and enjoy the discussion and the learning.

Bibliography

Adam Clarke's Commentary - Galatians
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Life Application Study Bible.
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The Enduring Word Bible Commentary – Galatians.
The Expositor's Bible – Galatians

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May the Lord bless you as you learn and grow in His grace.

1. Is it enough?

Gal. 1:1-10

Big idea: Adding man's effort to the gospel destroys God's free gift.

It had been a successful trip. Hundreds had come to faith, and Paul had planted churches on Cyprus and across Galatia in cities like Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Sadly, Judaizers had followed Paul and sowed the seeds of doubt in the minds of the people. What Paul told you wasn't enough. You have to keep all the Jewish laws to be saved. The cross of Jesus is not enough. Paul asserts that the Galatians became confused by the Judaizer false teachers. Paul had told them one thing, and now the Jews were telling them something else. Who was telling the truth? Sadly many believed the Judaizers for their ways made sense. For Paul, the gospel is about Jesus Christ dying on the cross. It is a comfort for us in good times and in bad.

The church has battled some of the same questions for centuries. We wonder if the cross is enough. Don't you have to do penance or good deeds like mission trips? Don't you have to give up dancing or alcohol? It seems too simple for Jesus to die on a cross so that you have salvation if you believe. In our day, the cross is often not considered enough, and churches add requirements for redemption. People struggle with the simplicity of the gospel. God becoming man and dying for our sin to save us from sin is hard to believe. We want to feel like we have earned salvation somehow. In the process, God soon gets left out. The gospel is made more appealing and suited to the culture. It becomes about people's works and people's desires. It soon is not about Jesus and the cross anymore.

It would seem so simple. Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead. He saved us from sin and gave us what we needed for a joy-filled life 2000 years ago. Our struggle is that the gospel offends our pride because it says that we can't save ourselves. The gospel offends our wisdom since it spares us by something that many think is foolish. For those who will accept the gospel, it is an incredible comfort when things are not going well or when we face sin and death. The cross covers our sins and lets us know that we are not alone in this world. Easter promises that we have a life after death and hope for the future. We are forgiven and restored, and it is all a gift. Our faith is in Jesus. Nothing else is needed. It may seem too easy, but it is more than enough.

1. How often do you write letters to other people? When you write, how do you start the letter?

Years ago, I was taught to begin a letter with a salutation like "Dear Grandma." The message was to be filled with news and to make sure to thank the people for gifts that they may have given me. Of course, you ended the letter with your name so that people knew who sent the note if they hadn't guessed it from the return address on the envelope. How different times are today with email and twitter. The idea of a four or five-page letter filled with news is replaced with short and sweet messages. It may be helpful to talk about what it was like for Paul in the days when letters were infrequent and expensive to send.

Read Gal. 1:1-10

2. Verse 1. How does Paul describe himself? Where does Paul get his authority?

Paul begins this letter as most letters start in his day. He started by introducing himself as an apostle. Paul was not one of the original twelve disciples but had been specially called by the Lord on the Damascus Road. He notes that God sent him on his mission. No human or human council had authorized him to do ministry. His authority came from The Lord. Paul begins with his credentials because the Judaizers questioned his authority. In these few words, Paul claims to represent God and that his message is consistent with the teachings of Jesus himself. Anyone who wondered what Paul had taught was questioning God Himself.

3. Verse 4. What does Paul declare about Jesus? How important is that truth to our faith?

Paul begins with the unadulterated gospel in a nutshell. Jesus died on the cross and rose on Easter to save us from our sin and from the evil effects of the world where we live. If the church or any Christian loses faith in this truth, the Christian faith falls apart. It is the reason that most churches put a large cross at the front of the church. It is the center of our faith. For Paul, it is the groundwork of this epistle. For us, it is the comfort that is the help when times get tough. We believe God will be there when a loved one dies so that those who die in faith will go to heaven. We believe God will help us and comfort us when life hits a bump in the road. We refuse to believe Satan's lies that say it isn't enough. We believe the cross and the empty tomb are all that we need.

4. Verse 6. What has Paul heard that shocks him? How long has he been away from the Galatians?

Paul seems to be amazed at the ease with which the believers had given up the gospel that he had taught them just a few months before this. He had returned to Antioch at the end of the first missionary journey. The Judaizers had followed him and had taught that Paul hadn't given them the whole truth. The false teachers had explained that one needed to follow all the Jewish laws and customs to have salvation. You had to be circumcised and give a tithe to the Jewish Temple. The cross was fine, but there were requirements spelled out in the Old Testament for God's people. The Acts 15 council will settle the matter shortly, but Paul is writing before that council convenes. He wants the Galatians to understand that keeping Jewish law will not save them. Only the gospel will.

5. Verse 6. What is at stake if a person doesn't believe the gospel is enough? What are the dangers?

The tone of this letter shows how important a matter the protection of the gospel is. Many in our day don't act like the cross is enough. Churches have added penance to simple forgiveness and activities like mission trips or extraordinary giving in addition to the gospel to provide salvation. We also have added things like tithing, not drinking alcohol, or even having special clothes to wear. It is as if we think that the gospel is not enough. God saves us up to a certain point, but we have to make it the rest of the way. The problem is, "how will you ever know if you did enough?" Did you do enough good deeds to get into heaven? Did you live a life holy enough that God will accept you? When salvation depends on us even a little, we will always wonder if it was enough. Thanks be to God that what Jesus did on the cross was all that we need. The thief on the cross knew he was going to paradise because of Jesus' grace and not his works.

6. How is the gospel offensive to many in our culture?

The gospel message would seem so simple. Jesus died on the cross to save us from sin and rose from the dead to give us eternal life. First, there are people whose pride is offended by the gospel. The gospel says we can't save ourselves or please God without salvation. Some are offended because they don't like to think that they must depend on God. Second, the gospel offends our wisdom since the gospel is foolish to many. The idea that Jesus dying on the cross 2000 years ago can save me isn't logical to many. They want something that makes sense. Finally, the gospel offends our understanding of science and knowledge. People rising from the dead and going to heaven is hard to comprehend. Miracles can't happen, and heaven is hard to find when we turn our telescopes to the night sky. All of the truths of the Bible seem to be fables and fairy tales. People don't want to accept what doesn't fit in their framework of reality.

7. Verse 7. How confusing would it be to be told that you have to keep all the Old Testament laws to be saved? How does that contradict the gospel?

Paul had told them the simple gospel of Jesus, and the Judaizers had come and added more duties and traditions to keep. It must have been very confusing to the people. Who should they believe, and which gospel should they accept? The large number of gentile believers had caused a problem. The Judaizers

were attempting to turn the gentiles into Jewish Christians. It wasn't that the Judaizers didn't believe in Jesus. They just couldn't let go of Moses. Moses had given them status and made them unique among the peoples of the world. They felt that the Christian faith should have all the elements of the Jewish faith as well as the cross. That was very confusing to gentiles who were often unaware of many of the Jewish customs that they were now supposed to keep.

8. Verse 7. Why do you think that the gospel is so hard for some people to believe? What are some things that we believe in that we can't understand?

The gospel may be simple, but it is often hard for people to believe. It is hard to understand that God would become a man to save us. It is hard to believe that the death and resurrection of one man 2000 years ago will save all the people of the world who put their trust in him. It just isn't logical. We want something concrete that we can believe. Ironically, most people believe that airplanes can fly or that a drug can cure some form of disease even though we can't explain it. Ultimately, salvation is a matter of faith. You have to believe that you will be saved by the cross simply because Jesus and the Bible say that it is true. It would be nice to interview someone who came back from heaven, so we know it is true, but that is not possible.

9. What do people who reject the gospel think will save them?

We somehow believe that we have to have a part in saving ourselves. Many people push aside the gospel for the "solid" things of the earth. Technology and science may save us from the asteroid that hits the Earth or cancer that eats our body. If we can work hard enough and smart enough, we can create a paradise here on earth that will last forever. Even if we accept that the cross can save us, we want to add good works or lives holier than others to the cross. We want to explain that some won't get to heaven because they are not good enough. It is pride that often keeps us from accepting that salvation could be a gift from a God who loves us. We would sooner save ourselves.

10. Verse 8-9. How important is it to share the gospel accurately? What is the punishment for twisting the gospel?

Paul used strong language here because this can make or break the gospel. What the Judaizers called a gospel was not a gospel at all. It burdened the people with centuries of Jewish law instead of releasing them from their sins as the gospel does. Paul says we should not believe them even if they claim, as many religions do, that an angel came down from heaven and gave this new revelation. Such claims should be suspect, for they do a lot of harm by confusing people and keeping them from the real gospel. Paul goes even further by telling us that God condemns such people. They strip the truth from people in order to push forward their agenda. The Judaizers wanted to force the Jewish law on the new Christians and confused the path to heaven.

11. Verse 8. How is the twisting of the truth more difficult to spot than an outright lie?

The Judaizers were telling part of the truth. They praised the cross of Jesus but denied that it was enough for salvation. Like many today, they twist the Lord's words. Such a twisted truth is hard to spot. We sense the facts present, but if we are not careful, we miss what has been added or changed. An outright lie is easy to spot because there is no truth in it at all. Sadly, there will always be people who alter the gospel. Sometimes they do so because of ignorance. Other times they don't want to accept what God teaches, and so they soften it or make it more in line with the culture of the day. It is essential to know your Bible and know it well. You have to be able to compare what people say to the word of God. God doesn't change His mind or add to the Bible. If what they are saying is different than scripture, it is not from God.

12. Verse 10. What accusations do you think were made against Paul? How does Paul defend himself?

As we read between the lines, the Judaizers accused Paul of compromising the law. The Jews thought that everyone should keep the Law of Moses. Paul was not forcing gentiles to be circumcised, to keep food laws, or pay the temple tax. He was lax with the gentiles to gain their support. As the Acts 15 council would later decide, these things were not necessary for salvation. They were a burden that the gentiles should not have to bear (Acts 15:10). Paul refutes their claims with harsh language that reprimands the Galatians and curses the Judaizers. He is not seeking anyone's favor but the approval of God. He will continue to proclaim God's truth as he serves the Lord.

13. Is the gospel enough? How does it give comfort in times of trouble?

The gospel is all that we need. Jesus died for our sins, and we have forgiveness without us having to do penance or any other good deed. Jesus rose so that we might rise and have eternal life. Men try to add things to that simple truth, but we can't do anything that improves our odds of forgiveness or salvation than merely believing in what Jesus has already done. In a way, that is the great comfort for us. We look at his sacrifice instead of our failings. We never have to wonder if we have done enough or if we are going to heaven. Jesus has done it all. If we believe that, we can have peace and joy that others do not have. The gospel declares what God has done is a gift. Our love for God and all the good things we do are in response to what He has done. The pages of scripture show the saints as flawed people who broke all the commandments. They are forgiven people who repented of their sins and trusted God for forgiveness and life. The gospel is enough. It is more than enough. It is a gift of love from a God who did it all because He knew we could not save ourselves.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1. Why is it important to remember that salvation is the work of Jesus and not our work?

Deep 2. What steps will you take when it seems that a message may not be valid? How will you know what God said and what is the voice of others?

Deep 3. Who might you write or speak to who is struggling with the truth? What do you think you need to tell them that you learned from Paul?

2 Who is welcome?

Gal. 2:11-21

Everyone needs the grace that only Jesus can give.

It was Peter's second denial of Jesus. He had come to Antioch to see the exciting things happening in this church. Antioch had a church filled with Jews and Gentiles, all living in grace as equals. Peter ate with them until a group of strict Jews came to visit. Then Peter withdrew from the Gentiles and refused to eat with them. Freedom had turned to fear. Jesus had freed Peter from the law in Acts 10 when Peter had been given a vision by God and told to eat with the Gentile Cornelius. Now He was afraid of the Jews and wanted to exclude those who the Jews thought were imperfect. He failed the church by putting his trust in the law instead of the gospel. Sadly, others followed him in his hypocrisy. His actions divided the church as the Jews turned their backs on their friends. Paul took him to the task and showed him that everyone is equal in the church.

The church still struggles with who is welcome. It is uncomfortable to worship with people who come dirty to church or who have broken lives. We need to remember the freedom that Jesus has given us. Worshipping with people of a rainbow of colors and nationalities who are all part of the greater church brings joy. Sadly, we get uncomfortable with people who are less than perfect. We struggle with the needy person who lives in poverty or the couple living together. Are they welcome in our church so that they can rebuild their lives in Jesus? We need to remember that we are saved by grace just as they are. There are always broken parts to our lives that God and others forgive. We need to forgive others who are not so perfect as well. We need to forgive lest we lead others to condemn them, too. God loves the broken and wants us to reach out to them as brothers and sisters since we all need the forgiveness and healing of Jesus.

The motivation for admitting others is because Christ has accepted us. If we are honest, there are so many things that Jesus has done for us through our lives. He has helped us raise our family and be a good employee at our job. Jesus has given us values in His word and a purpose in life. We draw close to our God because of all the good things that He has done for us. The broken and hurting around us need that gift as much as we do. Jesus is their only hope for healing in lives that are not right. We must embrace them and help them. As a Lutheran, I cherish the gift of grace without strings. Luther beat himself and never felt he was righteous enough until he understood grace in the book of Romans. We are his beneficiaries. We can say to Satan and to others who accuse us that the cross forgives us. We have the chance to welcome others into that grace so that they can let the Lord rebuild their lives. Let us welcome them into God's presence so that they may feel God's grace as we have.

1. What divisions do you see in our culture? How do people often treat people who live or think differently than they do?

As I write this, America is more divided than ever. Issues like political parties, race, age, and region divide us. We are hotly divided about many topics and seem to expect everyone else to live and think as we do. We have harsh words for people who are different. We believe that they are fools and that they can't be intelligent just because they don't accept what we believe. God created a diversity of people who all have contributions that they can make to the culture and o the discussion. No person is totally right. The real answers will come as people listen to one another and respect one another. It is easy to separate from those who are different. It is harder to join together so that we can be more than either of us could be by themselves.

Read Gal. 2:11-21

2. Verse 12. What was Peter's behavior like before and after the strict Jews came?

When Peter arrived in Antioch, he saw a church with a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, all living in grace and living as equals. It would seem that he had eaten with gentiles before and was glad to eat at this mixed meal in Antioch. That should not be surprising since he had received a vision from God in Acts 10 to eat with the Gentile Cornelius. Then a group of strict Jews came to visit, and Peter withdrew and refused to eat with the Gentiles because of fear. The text says that they were from James' group, which is from the Jerusalem church. Other Jews soon joined him, and the church divided. Peter had denied the grace of his Lord who had eaten with tax collectors and sinners.

3. Verse 12 What did Peter's actions infer to the other Christians?

Peter's actions implied that there was a difference between Jews and Gentiles. It told people that the Jews would always be closer to the Lord and that it was a gap that the Gentiles could never make up. You wonder what the Jews said to Peter that made him change his behavior. Perhaps they argued that Peter was abandoning his heritage and contended that to do so was a sin. Peter gave in to their arguments and divided the church. Only pure Jews were welcome to dine together. Gentiles were excluded to the other table at the fellowship meal. They were made to feel imperfect and second rate to the Jews. The grace that had made them one fellowship died in that instant.

4. Verse 13. How did Peter's actions influence other Christians?

Sadly as Peter changed tables, so did a whole group of others, including Barnabas. Peter was one of the twelve disciples, and the Jews followed his lead. They turned their backs on their friends because Peter said that was the right thing to do by his actions. Barnabas and the others should have known better. Suddenly this church that had been so godly and so merciful became a church divided with the Jews closing in on themselves and telling the Gentiles they were not saved. Imagine how that hurt. They had turned their backs on the world in favor of God, and now the church turned on them. Paul mentioned Barnabas specifically. Perhaps, Paul was surprised that his partner on the first missionary journey who had preached to and ate with gentiles across Asia Minor would now turn against what they had taught. Peter's example must have been compelling.

5. Verse 13. What do you think would have happened in Antioch if Paul had not opposed Peter?

Let the group ponder on how this hypocrisy would have affected the church. Undoubtedly, the church would have had divisions, and the gentiles would have felt second-rate compared to the Jews. One wonders if the gentiles would have thought that they had to keep all the Jewish law to be equal to the descendants of Abraham. Would the gentiles have slowly left the Christian church and become an offshoot of the Jewish faith? The events of this chapter happened before the church council of Acts 15. At that council, the early church decided not to lay the heavy burden of Jewish law on the gentiles. It was God's hand that Paul intervened when he did.

6. How do you know when to stand your ground and when to quietly show grace to others who say or do wrong things?

All conflicts are not the same. Paul confronted Peter publically because Peter's example and leadership were about to undo the message of the gospel. To confront people for every mistake would shatter relationships and churches. Church splits have happened over the color of the carpet in the sanctuary. It is better to follow the pattern of Matthew 18, where you speak to the person privately first and only bring it to the church if it involves a specific sin. This course of action gives the person who is wrong a chance to change their actions and their words. It causes a minimum of division and offers an opportunity for people to watch each other's backs. Sometimes, the disagreement is judged not to be worth even speaking up. It may be a word misspoken or a direction that ministry is going. If there is no sin or if the error will soon

pass, there may be wisdom in just letting it go. No one wants every mistake pointed out publically or privately.

7. Verse 14. In Acts 10, Peter had a vision from God. How did it affect his freedom in the gospel?

Jesus had freed Peter from the law. In Acts 10, Peter had been given a vision by the Lord in which he was told to eat unclean meat from a sheet lowered from heaven. He balked because the food was not Kosher, and he didn't want to sin. The Lord showed Peter that he could eat with the gentiles, for we were saved by grace and not by the law. When the vision ended, he went with gentiles and ate at the home of a Roman centurion. Peter had learned firsthand that God loved everyone and welcomed them into His church equally. Perhaps the Jewish group caught Peter by surprise. Perhaps they argued that Peter was abandoning his heritage and contended that to do so was a sin. His revelation from the Lord and his actions here made him a hypocrite. He knew what Jesus told him was right, and he did something else out of fear of James and the Jerusalem Christians.

8. Verse 16. How is Peter following the law and not the gospel? What are the consequences when we follow that decision?

By moving tables, Peter implied that there was a difference between Jews and Gentiles and that this difference could never be bridged. Like the temple in Jerusalem, there was no way a gentile could come into the inner court. That honor was reserved for those born Jew. To the Jew, God had made them unique and better than all the people of the earth. The rest of the world was trash, and they were chosen. They forgot that their choosing was grace and saw it as something they had earned. Keep the laws, and you kept that distinctive position of God's love. Paul knows that we all stand condemned as sinners before God, whether you are a Jew or a Gentile. Paul knows that the law can't save us. We must throw ourselves on the mercy of the gospel. If we depend on the law, we fail. Only by the gospel can we be saved.

9. Verse 16. What difference does it make that we live by grace and not by the law?

To live by the law may seem more comfortable because there are prescriptions and a substantial list of dos and don'ts. It will only fail, however. Every day we sin, and that sets us up for failure. We will continuously be aware of things we did that were wrong and the right things that we failed to do. Paul expresses that struggle in Romans 7:14-20. He says in verse 15, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate I do." To live by grace is to live in God's mercy as God forgives the past and helps us to be more like Him in the future. The law brings us fear and failure. Grace brings us peace and a closer relationship with God, where we can do ministry and live in His name. By forcing the Gentiles to live by the law, the Jews were bringing them into failure. They could not keep the law and would be tempted to throw faith away.

10. Verse 17. How can we live in grace if we still sin? Don't we need the law because the gospel is too easy?

Paul seems to be responding to people who think that giving grace without adding the law promotes sin. The Jews felt that the requirements for godly living were necessary if the salvation of God was to be effective. Without those requirements, you encourage a sinful life by making it too easy to receive forgiveness. Paul says that Jesus is not responsible for promoting sin. All men sin for it is part of our human nature. He sees mercy as giving people the chance to live the lifestyle and values that God requires. God wipes the past sins away and empowers us to fight temptations today so that we may live as a child of God tomorrow. In our day, there is still a fear that people will commit a sin and ask for quick forgiveness only to sin again and again as if the law never existed. We need to stress, as Paul does, that keeping the law is impossible for any person. Grace opens up the chance for the love of God to motivate us to live for God and others without any fear of past wrongs.

11. Verse 20 How has life changed because of Jesus? How do we now see ourselves?

In a few simple phrases, Paul shares the change that Christians experience because Jesus has become their Lord. To capture the depth of this wonder, each of us should think about what our lives would be without Jesus. What would your family be like if there were never family devotions? What would your character be like if Jesus wasn't living in you? These blessings are grace. We never earned any of it but were given these gifts because we have received the benefits of Christ's cross. The Christian responds to such gifts by sacrificing our lives to God so that we grow in the blessings that He continues to give. We give ourselves to him so that our character and love for others grows. What a relief it is for the Christian. No longer do we see ourselves as always striving to gain God's favor. We are people who have God's love and who want to return the love that God has given us.

12. What does it mean to live by faith and grace? How does that affect how we see others?

Living by grace is freedom and commitment. I am free from my past mistakes. They are forgiven, and the Lord will never bring them up again. I never have to think about them or live in fear because of them. Instead, I commit myself to the Lord. I want to live with God's values and attitudes. I see myself growing in God's grace and see that those who stay close to the Lord will see greater blessings because they are daily cared for and guided by God. I see others as people forgiven by God. No comparison says this person is better or worse than I am. We are all free and not judged at how well we keep the law. We are all products of grace forgiven from the past and pushing forward as we journey with the Lord and his plan.

13. If the church separates itself from those who are less than perfect, how does that take away the gospel?

If the church separates from those less perfect, it judges people who have been forgiven by the Lord. Like the Judaizers, we set aside the gospel and make heaven something we have to earn by our actions. We make the cross something that was not necessary since we could earn heaven and the favor of God by ourselves. We must look at the less than perfect as people forgiven by Christ. We are all imperfect people, and we are all here as part of God's church because the cross redeemed us, and we need help to live with His values for the present so that we can have a better future. The gospel is for the imperfect like us. The only perfect man who ever lived gave His life on the cross so that we might have a chance to have a relationship with God and a ministry to others.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1. Why do you think it is easier for people to live by rules than to trust that God will save them by the cross?

Deep 2. What are some of the good deeds that you do in response to the grace God has given you?

Deep 3. What is one way that you can show someone else who is struggling in their faith that they are essential to you and the Lord?

3. Does God keep His promises?

Gal. 3:15-25

Big idea: God does keep His promises every day

Paul had been preaching the gospel. The Judaizers said, “Wait, what about the law?” They contended that the gospel was Ok but that it couldn’t set aside the law given to Moses centuries before Jesus came. A true believer must be circumcised, eat kosher foods, and keep the Sabbath. Paul begins his argument by showing that the promise kept in Jesus came to Abraham centuries before Moses received the law. The gospel came first, and the law can’t set it aside. When God makes a promise, He will keep it and not change His promise. The law came years later to help people see that they needed the gospel. The people had slowly forgotten God in Egypt and acted like they didn’t need Him. The law was given to show humanity how sinful he was and that he needed a savior. The law would lead people to the gospel by showing them that they could not save themselves. The law can’t save us. It shows us that we need to be set free by the gospel.

People still struggle with the relationship between the law and the gospel. A lot of people walk away from the church because they don’t think that they can ever be good enough for God. Some denominations act like the gospel isn’t enough. You have to add rules for people to keep so that they are good enough to be saved. We have to understand that we can never do enough to be delivered by the law. The law expects a perfection that we can never accomplish. Rather than softening the law so that we can somehow keep it, we need to let the law lead us to the gospel. Once we have recognized that we are wretched sinners, we will be ready to throw ourselves on the mercy of God at the cross. The law has the purpose of nagging our conscience until we admit that we need the gospel. When we have been saved from sin, the law then shows us the blessings of living as a person who is not trapped by lust, greed, anger, or a host of other sins. It shows us what it means to live as people free from guilt and living in the love of Jesus.

The law must be put in its proper place. It was never meant to supplant the gospel but to prepare us for the promises of God given to us in the cross. Without the law, how would we ever know that we needed the gospel? God wanted more for us than to be trapped in our sins and our sinful emotions. He freed us by the cross. He would wipe away the past sins and prepare us for a relationship with Him built on His love. The law helped us to see what life was without God and what it could be if we were to live with Him and rely on Him all our lives. Everything would be based on His promises and not on our ability to keep the law perfectly. What a joy that is for our lives. We are imperfect and break the law and our promises all the time. The promise of God, which was first given to Adam and then to Abraham, is something on which we can rely. God welcomes us into His kingdom in spite of our sins. He loves us and sacrificed His Son so we can have a life that we could never have without him.

1. How good are you at keeping your promises? What is the last promise you made to yourself or to someone else that you never kept?

I think of all the New Year’s promises that I made and never kept. I think of the promises to my wife that I forgot about and then had to apologize. Sometimes, I don’t follow the pledge because I forgot what I said that I would do. Other times, something kept me from keeping the promise. It may have been a conflict at work that took the time I was going to use to help someone else. It may have been that I found I just wasn’t skilled enough to help them and keep the promise. Let the group discuss how well they have kept their promises and what gets in the way of keeping promises.

Read Gal. 3:15-25

2. Verse 16. Which came first, according to Paul, the law or the gospel? Why does it matter?

Paul begins his arguments by pointing out that God's promise came before the law. The covenant came to Abraham six hundred years before Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. God made promises to Abraham of land, protection, and of a descendant who would change the world. All those promises were unconditional. Abraham was required to do nothing for those promises to come true. We can look back and see how God kept every one of those promises and kept them in a way that was greater than Abraham would have ever guessed. It mattered because the Judaizers said that the law came first since Moses was before Jesus. In their minds, the law was given as the only way to build a relationship with God. The cross was given to make that easier.

3. Verse 16. Through whom were the promises to Abraham fulfilled?

Abraham knew that the promises would be fulfilled through a single person. As more and more promises were given in the Bible, the Jews knew that the commitments would reach their ultimate fulfillment through the one person of the Messiah. It was the Messiah would be a blessing to all the nations and who would make the name of Abraham great to the entire world. He alone would be the loving king that the people of Israel were seeking. He alone would enable the people to have a relationship with God called faith through the cross. The Old Testament people had salvation as they believed in the promises that God had made to Abraham and others like David. New Testament people like us have that salvation by accepting that the cross fulfilled the promises and that faith gives us the salvation that God promised to us all. We believe that God will never go back on His promise.

4. Verse 17. Why can't the law change the conditions for salvation? Why does that matter to us?

Paul says that the law came 430 years after the gospel. That gives the gospel priority since God doesn't change His mind. We might promise to help a friend and then have to call them and change the promise when something comes up. God never goes back on His word. In the Bible, new promises build on the commitments that God has made before. They may give more information or show us the magnitude of the commitment. They never take the promise back. This truth is vital to us because it means that the law isn't additional conditions we have to keep to get the promises that God made to Adam and Eve and Abraham. The law is to show us how much we need the gifts of the gospel. We can't earn them with pilgrimages or a perfect life.

5. Verse 17. Why can't the law save us? Can we ever do enough good to satisfy God's requirements?

If we are honest with ourselves, we can never keep the law. We may do well in one area, but we will fail in another. Some want to think that you can make pilgrimages or significant donations to the church to improve your odds of salvation. Others want to add rules like no dancing or no alcohol so that you are purer than others. Such additions give doubt to believers. You always wonder if you have done enough to save yourself. The Gospel pushes all that aside and says Jesus did it all. It is not about you but about Him and His work. Our good works are always in response to His love. We help others and love God because He loved us first with no strings attached. Good deeds don't earn salvation. They are done because we know we are saved.

6. How would you convince a friend that good works are the way to be saved?

It might begin with a simple question, "Are your good works giving you confidence that you will be saved?" Many have walked away from the church because they don't think that they can ever keep up to God's standards. They live less than perfect lives and abandon God because they believe He can't love them. There will always be a certain amount of doubt if you are trusting in yourself, even a little bit, for

salvation. Tell them about the gift that Jesus gives in the cross. He wipes away your past sins. God walks with you to help you with the temptations you face each day. He hands you eternal life. Our challenge is always helping people to see that the gift is free. People think that there is invariably a catch when someone offers you something free. With God, the gift is free, just like the love a mother gives her child. She will love, feed, and clothe that child, whether it screams or smiles. Her affection is not dependent on the child's actions. Neither is God's love for us.

7. Verse 19. God gave the law through a mediator. Who was that mediator, and why was the law given if it didn't offer salvation?

The mediator was Moses. While God spoke the promises directly to Abraham, God chose to give the law on Mount Sinai to Moses so that he could bring it down to the people. The text says that the law was given because of transgressions. Coming out of Egypt, the people of Israel didn't know what was right and what was evil. The law taught the people God's values so that they would know how to live. It helped people who had no sense of right and wrong recognize faulty behavior. It helped them understand the grace in the promises that God had given them and how those promises were very different from the promises that the gods of Egypt made for their people. Without the law, they could not appreciate and rely on the gospel. Without the law, they could not understand how a saved people of God should live.

8. Verse 19. What traps do we fall into when we think that the gospel is not enough for salvation?

When we don't believe that the gospel is enough, we fall into the traps of adding a little more so that we can feel secure about our salvation. We will add prohibitions on dancing, alcohol, and other conduct so that we will appear holier than others. We will add accomplishments like pilgrimages, service opportunities, or full-time service to the Lord as a way of buying some extra merit before God. Such attempts to earn God's love or approval make us prisoners to the law. We will never quite feel like we have done enough and so we will always be trying to do more. We rob ourselves of the joy and confidence that we have in the gospel of Jesus Christ. His cross has done it all. We can know that we will have salvation because he earned it before we were even born. Those who have accepted God's promise have a peace that others will never find.

9. Verse 22. How does the law pave the way for the gospel?

Paul does say that the law has a purpose. The purpose is to show us that we need the gospel. Look at history before the law. At the time of the flood, people were so evil and thought that they didn't need God. During the captivity in Egypt, the Jews slowly forgot their God. The law was given to show the people why they needed a savior. It was a standard that showed us that we lie, steal, and hate others. The law shows us our sin so that we see our need for a savior. Without the law, it would be easy to think that God must love us just as we are. While we recoil at the idea that we are sinners, the law shows us our true nature with such conviction that we feel the weight of the law. We are forced to find a way to justify ourselves. The message of the gospel shows that we don't have to excuse ourselves. God has already cleansed us from our sins. The law helps us see our need, and the gospel fills that need.

10. Why is it essential that we believe the promises of the gospel? What happens if we think that God is more focused on law than on the gospel?

Doubt is the great enemy of the gospel. As we look through scriptures, we see again and again how God kept his promises. If we doubt that, we cause ourselves great pain. Just imagine what life would be like if you had to bargain or beg when you pray for prayers for God to listen and to help. What would it be like to be desperate and hope that God cared? Such is the prayer life of many in other religions. Thankfully God works differently. How terrible it would be if we approached death, wondering if we had done enough for salvation or if God might be favorable to us and let us into His heaven. Such is the fate of many in other religions, but God works differently. We have to believe that the same Jesus who

welcomed the thief on the cross into heaven will welcome us with all our sins and failings. On the last day, God will look at the cross and welcome us into salvation because of what Jesus did. If we hold onto that truth, we will have a joy that Satan can't take away.

11. Verse 24. Ultimately, what is the purpose of the law for those who have already been saved?

The law is our tutor. It shows us how Christians live as people who have been saved by God. They are to care about one another and live with the character of Jesus. They are to be loving husbands and wives. They are to care for their children and their friends. None of this saves them from sin, but the law can show us how to live a joyful and fulfilled life here on earth. It shows us the joys that come when we are honest, kind, and loving. It shows us the importance of putting our Lord first, above all things. It shows us the importance of rest on the Sabbath and character. If you live with the law as your guide, you will be unique in this world. You will have a set of values that can help you be a blessing to others and yourself. You will also rely on God to help you live as His child even as you are confident of the promises that God makes to His children. The law was given to the Israelites and us so that we know what it means to be children of God.

12. Verse 24. How is the law like a tutor that leads us to the gospel?

In Greek culture, a family might have a slave whose job it was to teach and discipline the children. Wealthy families might have such a slave for each child. It was their job to lead the child to school, discipline the child, and teach them manners. When the child became an adult, he or she had no need for the tutor any longer. They could manage their own life. The law is our tutor in that it shows us how bad we really are. God wants us to come into a relationship with Him called faith. He wants us to have that relationship as a free gift. The law shows us our sin so that we embrace God's gift. Once we have become a mature Christian, we don't need the law to convince us that we need the cross. We are no longer under the law's supervision. The law becomes our guide for living and not our master to lead us to the gospel.

13. How would you sum up the relationship of the law to the gospel based on Paul's arguments?

The law was not meant to supplant the gospel, but to prepare us for all the promises of God. Without the law, how would we know that we needed the gospel? Without the law, how would we have an understanding of what is right and wrong? The law shows us how much God wants us to have the gospel. He knew that we would not believe the promises until we were desperate and forced to look for someone to help us. The law shows us our weakness so that we have to throw ourselves on His mercy. It is those commandments that keep hammering at us that finally convince us that we need the sweet promises of God. Thus, the law is a gift of love. It was not meant to destroy people. It was meant to show us the bondage of life without God. It was meant to show us that we can't make things better but that we have to rely on the promises of God to give us hope and life. Don't be afraid of the law. Embrace it so that you see what God has given in the gospel. He is a friend who continues to promise and give us so much.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1. Where do you find yourself not feeling good enough for God? How is that the law speaking and not the gospel?

Deep 2. How has the gospel set you free from guilt and from feelings of just not being good enough?

Deep 3. How do you want to respond to this gift of the gospel? What are you free to do now that you don't have to live in guilt?

4. Is Christianity just a bunch of rules?

Gal. 4:21-31

Big idea: Grace should be how people know us.

Paul is distressed that the Galatians have traded in grace for a set of rules. While rules are simpler to grasp, faith is the path of freedom and joy. To help the people see why faith is better, Paul sets out four contrasts between authentic faith and pious rules using the Old Testament story of Hagar and Sarah from the book of Genesis. Paul begins by looking at how grace gives freedom, and religious laws enslave us. Isaac was the child of a free woman named Sarah, while Ishmael was the child of the slave woman Hagar. Those who live by the rules will be enslaved by them. He continues by showing that children of faith are children of promise. Isaac's birth was a miracle while Ishmael was born because Abraham doubted God and took matters into his own hands. Finally, Isaac received all of Abraham's inheritance while Ishmael received nothing. Faith brings God's love and blessings in a way that rule keepers will never know.

People wrongly see the church as keepers of a bunch of outdated rules. Nothing could be further from the truth. If people have that impression, 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. Legalism still enslaves people as they try to keep laws that they will never be able to obey. Faith frees people. Christians know that Jesus has done everything necessary for salvation. We live by the promise and expect that God has done what is required for our salvation. We don't feel that we need to keep some rules to have God's love. We already have that love in the cross of Jesus. Like Isaac, we are given the blessings of God through faith. Those who try to gain God's favor by keeping the rules will live in fear and doubt. Faith brings everything, and false piety is just an empty shell without God.

The highest service the church can do for others is to emphasize grace and not the rules. If the world thinks they need to earn God's favor, then we have failed them and failed our Lord. People will doubt themselves and God's mercy. They need the grace that only the cross can give. So let your light shine with God's grace so that every church becomes known for the love of Jesus that grace provides. 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. Grace trumps rules. When the people of God live by grace and not the law, they attract others to the Lord. People who are living in doubt and fear because they can't keep the law are released by the gospel to live as people of God. As the church lives in faith to Christ, we see that no person needs to earn God's favor. We already have it.

1. When you were growing up, who was the favorite child? What makes you think so?

I was lucky in that my parents never did play favorites. I was the oldest and had my chores that often my younger brothers could not do. I have seen families where one of the children is the favorite of mother or dad. Let the group share their stories. Be sure that they tell you what makes them think that their parents loved a sister or brother more than others in one way or another.

Read Gal. 4:21-31

2. Verse 22. What story does Paul use to illustrate the difference between grace and law? What is the difference in standing between Abraham's two sons?

Paul uses the Old Testament Story of Abraham and his family to show us how the grace frees us and rules enslave us. The Bible looks at two wives and Abraham's first two sons. Ishmael is the father of the Muslim Arabs, while Isaac is the father of the Jews and Christianity. Paul begins by looking at how grace gives freedom, while pious rules easily enslave us. Isaac was the child of a free woman named Sarah. Ishmael was the child of the slave woman Hagar. The status of the mothers affected the situation that the

children would have in life. Because Ishmael was a child of Hagar, he remained a servant even though he had born a child to Abraham. Ishmael may have thought he was the heir because he was born first, but he did not have the status of Isaac. Paul wanted the Galatians to consider which the Judaizers were more like and which child they wanted to become.

3. Verse 22. What difference does it make whether you live by faith or by the law?

Legalism still enslaves people. They work so hard to observe the rules even though they can never keep them perfectly. If they are not careful, they bind themselves to guilt and to doubt. They may take pride in keeping the law better than others, but they can never be sure that they have done enough to get to heaven. Their sins and imperfections always haunt them. Faith frees people. The Christian living by faith knows as he or she approaches death that Jesus died for them and provided everything needed for salvation. They throw themselves on the grace of God and find comfort and confidence. Churches put the cross at the center of their sanctuary to remind us of our freedom in Christ.

4. Verse 23. How were the two sons conceived? What makes the free son special?

Isaac was born as God's fulfillment of a promise. At age 100, God gave Abraham the son that God promised 25 years earlier. It was a miracle and a gift from the Lord. Ishmael was born in the ordinary way when a man and woman had a child. Sadly, Ishmael was born because Abraham doubted the promise and tried to keep God's promise by his own hands. He didn't believe God was going to keep His promise and so he took a concubine to have a child. Paul used this illustration to show the difference between authentic faith and the human-made religion of the Judaizers among the Galatians and today. 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. Judaizers with their ideas that we must work our way to heaven have never been the real children of Abraham.

5. How does living under the law or gospel change our expectations of what is necessary to please God?

Those who live by the law are like the pagans who believe they gain favor with God by keeping the rules of the Bible and ones that they have added. We must take a pilgrimage, give up drinking and dancing, or sacrifice your life for the cause. Only then will God love them and hopefully give them the gift of heaven. They have to beg and bargain to get into heaven. The faithful believe in the promises and expect that God has done what is necessary for our salvation. In the cross, God has done all that is necessary. While rules bring doubt, those who live by faith have peace. They have confidence that the cross has saved them and know that God loves them. Any works that they do are in response to what God has done.

6. Verse 24. How does Hagar represent the law given to the Israelites on Mt. Sinai?

The Jews proudly considered themselves children of Abraham. Paul shows that the Judaizers had become children of Moses and his covenant. Like Hagar, they were slaves to the covenant instead of children of the promise. Trying to win salvation through the law didn't make them superior but a people in bondage to a set of rules that were supposed to help them live as children of the promise. Forcing others to follow the rules was enslaving others under a law that they were never supposed to keep. If they saw the path to God as obeying the law, they would never be free since the law was meant to serve the gospel by bringing people to it.

7. Verse 26-8. How are Christians like Sarah and Isaac? What is the promise that we have?

We are people of a miraculous covenant. Sarah represents the Jerusalem that is above, that is heaven. The promise that we have is that all who peoples on earth will be blessed (Genesis 12:3) through Abraham. The quote in verse 27 is from Isaiah 54:1 and shows the gracious gift that salvation is. The barren woman, Sarah, was given the miraculous child. The gift of salvation through Jesus is a miracle as well given to us

because of God's great promise given in the Old Testament. The rules of the law need not enslave us. We are free. God has promised salvation to Jew and Gentile alike. Jesus died in the place of all of us sinners so that we might have freedom while Jesus took on our sins.

8. Verse 29. How were the Judaizers like Ismael in their treatment of the children of promise? (See Gen 21:8-10)

The Old Testament records in Genesis 21 that Ishmael began to mock his little brother. Isaac was probably about two years old, making Ishmael a teenager. Ishmael could see that even though he was older, Isaac was to inherit the bulk of the property as the real heir. It caused Sarah to complain that Ishmael mocked his brother and that he might hurt his brother out of jealousy. This persecution was playing out as the Judaizers followed Paul. Today, 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.

9. Verse 29. How do we cause pain to each other when we impose rules as a means to prove one's salvation?

Rule centered religions and rule-centered Christians still persecute those who try to live by grace. They demand that people live by their ideas of what religion should be. People are to be perfect and keep the laws that even they can't keep perfectly. Paul continually faced persecution from the Jews and Jewish Christians because grace is a threat to them. It overturns all their rules and expectations and shows that God is not angry but filled with love. Grace-based churches will still face persecution. The world wants to earn salvation or to find a better life in technology and the joys of the world. They don't want to see that they have to depend on Jesus and His cross for salvation. Rule people sometimes seem to act as if others should suffer their rules if they are going to have to live by them. They want us all in bondage rather than having the freedom of grace.

10. Verse 30. How is the inheritance of the law different from the inheritance of the gospel?

A final contrast between the law and the gospel is 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. Paul had come to believe that Judaism and Christianity could not be equal paths to salvation, just as Ishmael and Isaac could not both share the inheritance of Abraham. 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. Failings trap Ishmael's kind in that they can never forget and doubts that will haunt them. Ironically, the Jews in Paul's day saw this text as a rejection of the Gentiles. Paul saw it as a rejection of trying to save yourself by the law. It did not work then, and it will not work now.

11. Verse 30. What blessings can you expect as a child of God by faith? What happens if we compromise our teachings and give in to the Judaizers of our day?

The Isaac Christians of this world will dwell in the house of their father, God and enjoy the blessings of being part of his family. They will have confidence that they will receive the Easter inheritance of heaven. The inheritance is theirs through faith. With Jesus as our savior and our friend, we will have joy and peace that the world doesn't know. We will find the Lord protecting us and walking beside us as we live with His values and His love every day of our lives. We must not tolerate teachings like those of the Judaizers who twist the pure gospel of the cross. To do so would be to lose the blessings that we have. Ishmael, for all his rules, will be thrown outside the kingdom. Without Jesus, people who try to earn their way to heaven will live in fear and doubt. Without Jesus, men will claim to no avail that they were good people as they lay their cold bodies in the ground. Faith brings everything. Piety brings nothing when it is

without God. We must never compromise on this point because to do so loses everything we have in Christ.

12. Why should the church emphasize grace and not the rules of the law?

The most excellent service the church can do is to emphasize grace and not the rules. If the world thinks that we care about the rules and not the cross, then we have failed them, and we have failed our Lord. People will always try to make their lives better through personal power. We must show them the power and the love of the cross. Only the cross can truly save them. It was what Paul would spend 40 years of ministry fighting for. He would tell them of the love of Jesus and would have others follow behind him and tell people that Paul only gave half the truth. Our task will be to encourage people and help people with the gospel and not to persecute those who do not live up to some moral code. Grace is what will free them from sin. Rules will bind them into a prison that they can never keep and that they can never escape. We live as free people who must give our freedom in Christ to others as well.

13. How can people of grace help those who think Christianity is about working your way to heaven by keeping the rules?

Paul may seem harsh in this section, but it is because he sees how the rules can trap people into a life of pain and suffering. We are different. We need to let our light shine with God's grace so that the church becomes known for the love and grace of Jesus. 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. Grace trumps their rules. As the people of God live by grace and not the law, they will attract others to the cross. People will see your freedom and love for one another. It will make them 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 God. Share with them the freedom that you feel in Jesus so that Jesus might lift their hearts. Grace triumphs rules for grace opens up possibilities for your friends and family that the world cannot offer. Let them feel the joy you have in Christ.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1. Reread the story of Ishmael and Isaac in Gen. 21:1-21. How is Isaac, the son of promise? What is the reaction of Ishmael to having a younger brother who is now the heir?

Deep 2. How do you respond to the freedom that you have in the gospel? How do you depend on the Lord for help today and for a brighter future tomorrow?

Deep 3. Who do you know who are trapped in keeping the rules? How could you help them see that Jesus has done it all for them so that they can have your joy?

5. Living by the spirit

Gal. 5:16-26

Big idea: How can God expect me to be different?

Your life is a battlefield as you are pulled one way by your conscience and the other way by your emotions and desires. Paul describes the battle as Satan wants to pull you away from every good desire, and God wants to change you to be more like Him. It would seem hopeless, but we have a helper in the Holy Spirit who fights Satan's lies and strengthens you when you face temptations. We often give in because it is so hard to be part of that battle. Sadly, the sins that can result when we let Satan take control are frightening, and all have bitter consequences that can destroy our lives and the lives of those we love. There is an alternative. When the Spirit is in control, the fruit of such an experience are things like love, peace, and kindness. These are the qualities that we would like in our friends. Here God is offering to make them part of the new you. How can that happen? It happens as the power of the cross becomes stronger and stronger in you. The cross is stronger than Satan and guilt and can free you from their control. In the Holy Spirit, you can live a new life without fear and bondage to sin.

A lot of people think that the Christian life is too hard and the rules for living are too tricky. They don't understand what it means to be a Christian. Faith brings freedom from the guilt of our sins and the control of Satan. In this battle for our lives, we have a clear choice. We can let sin and Satan control us, or we can see the help of the Holy Spirit so that we can live differently. The holy lives that are impossible for us are learned and accomplished with the help of the Holy Spirit. He will bring the truth when Satan lies and give you strength when temptation is about to take control of you. Instead of being trapped in sins like the ones that Paul lists here, you will be a person with qualities that others will want for themselves. Life will be better as you live out the fruit of the Spirit. Your kindness and patience will become a model for others at work. Your love will fill your marriage and family so that you feel their love in return. At first, you may wonder how this can be. Just think about the demons that Jesus cast out of people with a simple word and no sweat. He still has the power to overcome the demons in our world. When we are in the word, and at the cross, Satan finds it harder to defeat us.

The path of the Christian life is more straightforward than many want to make it out to be. Paul says that we need to walk with the Holy Spirit. He will convince us that forgiveness is ours because of the cross. He will warn us of Satan's temptations and teach us to live differently. Nowhere does the Bible tell us that we have to change by our power. We walk with the Holy Spirit as our friend and guide in life, and soon we have distanced ourselves from Satan and are becoming a kinder, gentler, and more confident person in Christ. The change will be amazing. You will live without the guilt of the past, for Jesus forgives it. You will have peace and joy each day because the Lord is at your side. You will have confidence in your future because you know that God will be with you throughout your life and will take you to heaven as well. In a world filled with ugliness and uncertainty, you will be different. Life will be a slice of heaven here on earth. You will still have problems, but you will have a friend walking with you who will help you through them.

1. What benefits do you find in having close friendships? What would life be like if you could not depend on others?

Let the group discuss special friends that they have had over their lifetimes. For me, a special friend is someone who has your back. You can come to them at 3 in the morning, and they will get up and help you. You can share your joys and fears with them, and they will listen as if their life depended on it. They can be your sounding block when you have questions, and your encourager when you feel like the world is against you. In our lesson today, Paul will speak about such a friend, namely the Holy Spirit.

Read Gal. 5:16-26

2. Verse 17. What two opponents battle for your life and your future?

As we live out our lives, there is a constant tension between what we know we should do and what our desires tell us to do. Satan and his angels are continually working against every good intention that you have. He tempts you to lie to protect yourself. He wells up feelings of anger when someone insults you. You are the battlefield, and Satan wants to bring you down. It is Satan's way to hurt God by hurting those that God loves. Fortunately, the Holy Spirit is there to help you. He brings truth when Satan tells you lies. He strengthens the shield of faith when Satan tries to get us to doubt. He even gives you the sword of scripture so that you can stab Satan and knock him down. There are times that the Spirit is saving us from Satan, and there are times that the Holy Spirit is trying to save us from ourselves. The Spirit will help us learn what is right and do it.

3. Verse 17. How does the Holy Spirit help you in this battle for your soul and your life?

First, we need to admit that we need someone to help us in this battle. If anyone has ever tried to start a diet or begin to work out regularly, you know how hard it can be. You want to get to the gym or eat better but find you just don't get it done. For every good intention, there are lots of factors that tend to keep you from your goal. In our spiritual battle, we often feel pulled one way and then the other. It is the Spirit that was sent by Jesus (John 14-16) to teach us and help us to know God's truth. He also helps us to see when we do wrong and leads us back to the right path. He is our encourager and our strength when we battle the demons that are so much stronger than we are. He is available to every believer and will help us out in every need.

4. What would it be like to live without fearing the law and your past mistakes?

Paul says that if the Spirit leads you, you are not under the law's control. Imagine how the new you looks. Your past mistakes are gone and forgotten. Jesus forgave them. The Holy Spirit will help you live in peace as you have confidence because Jesus died for you. Each step of your life will be filled with joy as you walk with Him and let Him provide for you and protect you. The danger may come, but Jesus will be there. The future is certain. You may not know where you are going, but you are walking with the Spirit as your guide, and he knows where to go. In a world filled with uncertainty, walking with the Spirit is a slice of heaven here on earth. Life, in general, is hard, and the world filled with uncertainty, but it is easier when you keep the Holy Spirit near to take care of your past, present, and future.

5. Verse 19. What does life look like when Satan and the sinful nature take control?

Paul lists sins that were common in the Roman Empire. The Galatians had not only seen people caught in these sins but had seen their effects. He speaks of sexual sins like immorality, impurity, and debauchery. These are sins of the body that destroy our life as they give us passions that rule over us and demand we have more. Next, Paul warns against idolatry and witchcraft, which are sins in which something else comes before God. Thirdly, Paul says sins we have against others like hatred, discord, jealousy, and rage. Finally, Paul mentions the sins of pride and selfishness, followed by murders and drunkenness. The list is extensive and destructive. The Galatians would have known the cost of these sins in their world. They would have seen how sexual sins destroy families and how pride destroys the ability of the government to work and people to get along. If these sins are allowed to go unchecked, they will consume people and communities.

6. Verse 19. How does the world justify the sins mentioned? Does the justification of these sins make things better?

We often deny the obvious. We know in our hearts that such things are wrong, and we make a habit of overlooking what is apparent to all. It would have been easy for anyone among the Galatians to have

excused such sins by saying that everyone else is doing them. It is much the same in our day. It is not that we can't see what is wrong. It is that we are unwilling to admit that such sin is wrong. Denying wrongdoing won't change the consequences. Immorality will still cause divorce. Jealousy will destroy a friendship. Finally, factions will break up churches and denominations. Sin has effects, and pretending that they are not sins changes nothing.

7. Verse 21. What are the consequences of letting the sinful nature rule you? What is at stake here?

Paul does not take these sins lightly. He has said it once and now repeats that living with such sins will cause people to lose eternal life. Satan has a plan. He wants to lure you into sin and let it cause you pain and suffering in this life. He knows that lust for a coworker or anger at your spouse will cause turmoil and lead you into other sins. He will lead you to those sins again and again until it jeopardizes your eternal life. Sin stuck people tend to push God away because they feel so guilty before him. They find it hard to pray, study the bible, or go to church. Soon Satan has them where he wants them. If we allow the sinful nature control, it will ruin both this life and the next.

8. Verse 22-23. What does life look like when you are bearing the fruit of the Spirit?

We need to begin by talking about what it means that Paul calls these "fruit." They are fruit, not gifts because they naturally grow in the lives of all Christians. The gifts of the spirit are different for every believer. All of us should have the fruit of the Spirit, and the fruits are interconnected, just like grapes or bananas. Fruit also does not sprout immediately. They grow over a season as the fruit of the spirit grows over a lifetime. Fruit also separate Christians from the rest of the world and are sweet to those around us. (Who doesn't like to be around a patient, kind, and loving person?) These fruits become the character of the Christian and distinguish them from others. They come from God and define our relationship with each other and our control of ourselves. A person who has these traits is someone that you want to be around as your friend and someone who you will gladly follow. The fruits are in stark contrast to sins common in the days of the Galatians and our world.

9. Verse 22-23. What can life be like when the Spirit is in control and helping you to have the qualities listed here?

As the Holy Spirit chases out the sins, he fills us with qualities that are like God himself. Consider how a person who had the qualities that are listed would impact the world around them. I believe that someone who has these qualities will find that others want to be around them and will come to depend on them. They will be closer to the Lord for the sin we have seen in the first list will not be part of their life. Instead, they will be people models of kindness and patience for others. They will be an asset to their families and those in their workplace. They will rise to the top when the world tries to get everyone down. They will have a better quality of life because the petty sins that all of us have in our lives will not get them down. They will even keep the law better because their character will push Satan away, and their God-given wisdom will help them to see the temptations to sin for what they are.

10. Verse 24. How is it possible to live a life so different than the world around us?

It is easy to doubt that such things can happen. Satan is powerful, and we can't stand up against him or his temptations. We can't control our weight, how can we control our anger? We can't manage our finances, how can we manage our life and keep it pure. The secret is that the cross of Jesus Christ and the word of God is stronger than Satan. Forgiveness is stronger than guilt. When Jesus says, "I forgive you," the Holy Spirit helps us believe that so that guilt is gone. We belong to Christ, and so we bring our faults to the cross to be forgiven so that our new life can begin. As we walk with the Holy Spirit, He helps us live differently. We walk with Him in life so that He can show us the path we are to take and encourage us to keep following Him. We can follow the Holy Spirit and live in the power of the cross as we travel through the jungles of this world.

11. How can we be sure that the Holy Spirit can free us from Satan and his temptations?

All you have to do is look at the gospels to see the power of God over Satan. Jesus spoke a single word without working up a sweat, and Satan had to flee. The Holy Spirit is God, and the demons can't resist His commands. The power of scripture will slay Satan, too. Just grab hold of your bible and start quoting its promises to overcome Satan's arguments and fill them with holes. Let's be honest. Satan is mighty, and no person can defeat him by themselves. He is no match for God or the word of God. Add the power of the cross to all of that, and Satan is a doomed demon that God can take care of easily. The closer you and I are to Jesus, the harder it is for Satan to work in our lives. Be in the word and walk with God, and Satan will find it harder to overcome you.

12. Verse 25. What is the path to this new life defeating the sinful nature and living by the Spirit?

When you find that you have persistent sins or feel that you don't measure up, you need to walk with the Holy Spirit. He will help you grow in your faith and become the person that you want to be. Just as good friends help us be better and bad friends get us in trouble, if you hang around the Holy Spirit, you will be more like Him. Be in the word and follow its commands and guidance. Let the Holy Spirit speak to you daily so that He might encourage you and lead you to a better life. Be in prayer, giving the Lord those persistent sins so that He might forgive you for your sin and lead you away from sin's control. The list of good qualities here may look daunting, but the Spirit will help you to acquire these character traits in your life little by little. You may not look different tomorrow, but as you walk with the Spirit, you will look different next year and even more five years from now.

13. What would it be like having a friend like the Holy Spirit to help you every day of your life?

I have heard many complain that the Christian life is too hard. The commandments seem daunting and unattainable. It makes a lot of people quit the faith or water it down so that they can manage their requirements without too much work. We need to remember that Jesus never expects that we will be perfect in our walk with Him. He loved people like King David, who committed adultery or St. Peter, who denied Him. What God wants is for us to grow in faith. That is where the helper, the Holy Spirit, comes into our lives. He is the friend that we need if we are going to succeed. He is stronger than Satan and can fill us with the scriptures which Satan abhors. He will teach us and mentor us so that the qualities that are in this text become part of our lives. What is impossible for you and I to do alone can be done with our friend, the Holy Spirit. He will walk with us all our lives, giving us help and guidance every day if we let Him do so through Bible study and prayer. Never give up or think that the battle with the sinful nature is too hard. Walk with your special friend and let the qualities you so desire rub off Him onto you.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1. What acts of the sinful nature are your greatest temptations? How have they impacted your life and the lives of those you love?

Deep 2. In what way do the fruits of the Spirit have to grow in life? What experiences have you had that have helped you grow in your character?

Deep 3. Which one of the fruits of the Spirit do you desire most? Why?

6. Doing good Galatians 6:1-10

Big idea: Why do I need to help others to be a Christian?

Paul finishes his discourse on law and gospel by sharing the difference between how the law and gospel deal with someone who is overwhelmed by sin. Surely the law would judge those who do not keep it entirely and be done with them. The gospel has a different desire. It wants to save the brother and restore him or her to the church. Paul begins by admonishing us to work to restore the brother while being careful that we don't fall into the same temptation. Every person has their faults and their pet sins. Our job is not to condemn them but rather to help them overcome their sins. Sometimes that means we have to help them with the burdens that weigh them down by caring for them in unusual ways during their time of recovery. We do so because we realize that we are not perfect either. We all sin, and we support each other, knowing that there may be a time that others may need to support us.

None of us are perfect either. There are new Christians in our midst who are just learning what it means to be a Christian. They swear and are living among broken relationships that often weigh them down. There are long-time Christians who mess up their lives. They have anger issues or marriages on the rocks. They know what they should be doing but are finding it hard to live the life that they want. It would be easy to toss them aside, but the gospel tells us that we need to find ways to encourage and help them. Pride could fill you like the Pharisee of Luke 18:11, who looks down on the tax collector near him. It would be better to do what Jesus would do and care for those who are struggling so that there will be people who will help us when we are struggling. We help those with self-inflicted pain and victims of the world's evil and troubles. Law condemns the less than perfect. The gospel lifts them.

The church should be a place for people to find help. Its natural state is to be filled with sinners seeking the mercy and assistance of our savior, not a place of refuge for the perfect who do not need God's grace. Christ would have us invest in each other. He uses the example of planting and reaping to show that those who sow the gospel love in their world will have a bigger chance of receiving such love for themselves. When we plant the love of God in our universe, we raise others who can love and care for us when we need it. By investing, we let the Lord magnify our feeble efforts. He can take the little love we give and work miracles. As each person sows the love of God instead of the harshness of the law, the church will have an abundant harvest of love and care. We may even be surprised at its depth. Sometimes that investment takes time just as seeds don't come up immediately in our garden. Don't be tired, and don't give up. It will take longer than you think to help others but know that God is working even if you can't see Him. He will change lives if we apply love and not just the law.

1. What do you find hardest about serving other people?

Let the group talk about their experiences. It may be that others are not grateful for their service or that it takes too much effort to help someone else. It might be that they don't feel qualified to help those who are struggling. Helping others is not always easy, and sometimes we feel like a failure if we do not have stellar results. Encourage the group to find ways to help each other in the group and to help people that they know. You don't have to be successful with changes every time. You need to reach out and help others. You may even find that someone will help you back.

Read Galatians 6:1-10

2. Verse 1. What is our responsibility to one another in Christ? How is that an act of grace?

When people are wrapped up in the law, it is easy to feel that others deserve the problems that they have. Paul spells out what it means to be people of grace. We are to be in church so that we can help others

overcome sin. Sometimes it is the new Christian who is just learning what it means to be a child of God. They swear. They have a life full of broken relationships. These are people that God wants you to mentor and help grow in faith. Sometimes, we encounter established Christians who mess up. They get divorced. They have anger issues or issues where they think they are better than everyone else. Our goal is not to condemn others who are struggling or discarding less than perfect people from the church. No one deserves such help, but it is the grace we have received from God and is an act of love as you help restore their relationship with God and the church.

3. Why is it so hard to help others? What is the alternative?

Yes, helping others takes a lot of love and courage, but what is the alternative. Just leave the church and find another church filled with imperfect people? No, they are part of the body. We want to get them well and healthy, like fixing a broken leg so that the church can walk again. While that person may sin alone, their sin affects the whole church, and so the church has a responsibility to help them and will find that supporting them will benefit the entire church in the end. Like Paul says in 1 Cor. 12, if one part of the body suffers, then we all suffer.

Conversely, you hope that someone will be that honest with you. You could be the one newly divorced and desperately need a friend who will walk with you and help you receive God's forgiveness and help with your walk in life. If you don't help others, who is going to help you?

4. Verse 2. What is the law of Christ (Gal. 5:14), and why should it encourage us to carry someone's burdens?

The law of Christ is to "love your neighbor as yourself." While each person needs to carry their load (Gal. 6:5), some burdens are ones that each of us must bear. Each of us has known a person who is losing their parent to cancer or struggling at work. We could ignore those people and act like we don't have time to help them with their problems. Paul tells people repeatedly that the church is God's way of caring for those who are struggling. We are there to encourage, to serve and to pray for those who have struggled. Sometimes the person struggling is a fellow Christian. Sometimes it is us, and we need the help of others. God brought us together in the church so that no one ever has to be alone. We are to be God's hands and feet to serve the brother so that others will be there when we need them.

5. Verse 2. Why is it important to let others help us with our burdens, and what kind of attitude is needed for such help to be given and received?

Bearing our brother's burdens brings us joy as it creates bonds of friendship. There are burdens that only Christians can carry for one another. Only a fellow Christian can help us feel forgiveness when we have sinned. Only a fellow Christian can use the power of God to lift us out of a problem. To help the brother, they and we need to be there in church. Sadly, so many people stop coming to church when life is not perfect. They are ashamed that they have troubles or feel like they are too busy taking care of their challenges to make time for church. Somehow, we need to foster such a caring attitude of grace that this is always the first place that people think to come. If this is a place of law, they will fear judgment for their imperfections. If it is a place of grace, it will be a place where people pray for them, hug them when they are down, and care for them when they need help.

6. Verse 3-4. Why must we discard pride if we are going to be servants and burden bearers for others?

When we think that it can never happen to us, we are fooling ourselves. Every Christian has value, and every Christian, including us, can fall to sin or struggle with the difficulties of life. You may not fall to lust, but you may be guilty of anger or gossip. We must never think of ourselves as too perfect to help others with their problems. When we look down on others or discard others as not being up to our standards, we are deceiving ourselves and robbing people of the forgiveness and help that we expect from

the Lord when we fail. All of us need to examine ourselves and ask if we are helping others as God has helped us. The grace of God compels us to show mercy to others. Often those who have fallen and been helped make excellent helpers for they know the value of a brother or sister who will lift them so that they can be whole again by God's grace and mercy.

7. Verse 1-5. How do we overcome pride according to Paul in these verses?

Paul would tell us that we need to watch ourselves (verse 1). Sin can lure us in so quickly that we have to be careful and honest about our feelings and attitudes. As we stand before the cross and realize that our value comes from Jesus, it is easier to see others in the same light. It also helps us from becoming too proud or desirous of respect because we help each other for Christ. Paul would tell us to test our actions (verse 4). Are we showing the love of Jesus that we profess to have? Are we showing his kindness, or are we comparing ourselves to others so that we may judge them. Our attitudes and words of compassion need to become deeds. We must not only think kindly, but we must also be gracious. Finally, we must carry our own load (verse 5). We must live as a person of God who is trustworthy and who is an example of what Jesus would do in this situation. Our load is to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Gal. 5:14). We have a responsibility to help others and can serve our brother by lifting them and keeping them accountable to the Lord.

8. Verse 6. What is the relationship between giving and honoring those who help us? How does giving allow us to help people no one person can serve alone?

When someone helps you, you need to share with those who helped you. Here, Paul is specifically talking about those who teach in the church. America has gotten into a terrible "me first" condition. We expect help but do not honor those who help us. The church is not to be like that. We are all to give generously to the servants in the church so that they can be provided for. God provides for His church, but He does it through you and me. We support the ministry so that we can be ministered to in our need. We give to the church so that it can help those who are in the hospital at no cost. We support the church so that it can use its facilities to help those with alcohol or drug additions, grief counseling, and children's ministries. As we bond together, we can help people with burdens that no one person can overcome.

9. Verse 7. How is helping others an investment? What is the harvest that we may reap if we care for others?

Paul wants us to think of it all as an investment. He uses the example of planting and reaping. If a person plants quality seed liberally in their garden, they have a much better chance of a good crop than someone who buys dollar store seed and spreads it thinly on the soil. You reap what you sow. If you don't take time to help others, who will you ask when you need help. Only the arrogant demand that the church helps them when they haven't helped others. The text hints that some of the Galatians had already been lax in supporting the church and helping others. Believers should look at their expectations from the church and should not complain if the church is not providing what they need if they are not giving their time and resources for others. There are natural consequences to the giving or withholding of love and help in the church. God and nature will not be mocked by those who expect much when they give little.

10. Verse 7. How is God able to take our investment in others and bring a better return than we ever imagined?

Just like our investments in a bank receive interest and grow, God can take our investments in the church and each other and make them do more than we expect. Think of what Jesus did with a boy's lunch at the feeding of the 5000. Think of what the Lord did with the single lives of Paul, John or Martin Luther. God has a way of multiplying our offerings so that they can do more than we ever expected them to do. A simple word of kindness or an act of love may change the course of a person's future. If we entrust gifts

of time, treasures, and love to the Lord; He can lift people out of the pit that they are in and change their future. We will find ourselves with a joy that we never imagined and friends that we may keep for life. Even a little goes a long way in the hands of our God.

11. Verse 9. What danger does Paul mention that we all face when we help others with their burdens?

It must have been discouraging for Paul to have spent two to three years ministering to the people of Galatia only to have them give up the gospel as soon as he was gone. He could have thrown up his hands in disgust, but instead, he wrote them and visited them two more times. Both the people with the burdens and the church at large may frustrate you at times. It is easy to be fatigued and want to give up. The key is to trust the Lord even as you seek to do your ministry better each month. Yes, you may need to change your method if something is not working, but it is necessary to keep trying and to believe that the Lord will bring a result from all your good work. Changing lives takes time. We want to put every situation in a microwave and have a change in a few minutes. People are more like a stew that has to simmer for hours before it is ready. We must trust that the Lord is working even when we can't see the immediate results.

12. How does the example of sowing and reaping help us when we find ourselves impatient and ready to quit?

Remember that when you sow your garden, it takes time. Seeds don't come up immediately. You have to water them and weed them. You watch the immature plants come up, and finally, you receive a harvest of vegetables that is worth the wait. Pull them up in the garden too early, and you have ruined the results. God wants us to keep investing and be patient. He wants us to water our work with prayer, trusting that He will bring a result from the work of our hands. It will probably take longer than we think or want. It will probably be harder than we ever thought that it would be. Yet, God assures us that there will be a harvest at the proper time. God will give us the time, and we must patiently take the time He offers to make lasting changes in the lives of others in the church and the world.

13. Is the Christian life just between God and me? Why is it important to include others?

There are some we know who think that faith is just about the relationship that they have with God. They don't need to worship with others or be part of a Bible class when they can read the Bible at home by themselves or watch worship on television sitting comfortably in their jammies and comfy slippers. God never intended for us to have faith alone. Faith is as much about others as it is about our relationship with God. A child's life is not just about their relationship with their parents. It is also about their relationship with their brothers and sisters. Our parents love our siblings as much as us and expect us to care for and love siblings as well. We love others because God loves them. We help them because we know that someday we might need them to help us. You will not survive well in this world if you don't surround yourself with other Christians. Only those who help others can expect to be supported in life. Going it alone is risky and selfish. God gave us brothers and sisters in the faith for a reason. Love will compel us to help them, as God has sustained us.

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1. What is the best approach to help a brother or sister struggling with a burden?

Deep 2. What keeps you serving others even when you would rather give up?

Deep 3. Who do you know who could use some "tender loving care"? What is one thing you could do that would bring God's healing to them?

1. Is it enough?

Gal. 1:1-10

Big idea: Adding man's effort to the gospel destroys God's free gift.

It had been a successful trip. Hundreds had come to faith, and Paul had planted churches on Cyprus and across Galatia in cities like Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Sadly, Judaizers had followed Paul and sowed the seeds of doubt in the minds of the people. What Paul told you wasn't enough. You have to keep all the Jewish laws to be saved. The cross of Jesus is not enough. Paul asserts that the Galatians became confused by the Judaizer false teachers. Paul had told them one thing, and now the Jews were telling them something else. Who was telling the truth? Sadly many believed the Judaizers for their ways made sense. For Paul, the gospel is about Jesus Christ dying on the cross. It is a comfort for us in good times and in bad.

The church has battled some of the same questions for centuries. We wonder if the cross is enough. Don't you have to do penance or good deeds like mission trips? Don't you have to give up dancing or alcohol? It seems too simple for Jesus to die on a cross so that you have salvation if you believe. In our day, the cross is often not considered enough, and churches add requirements for redemption. People struggle with the simplicity of the gospel. God becoming man and dying for our sin to save us from sin is hard to believe. We want to feel like we have earned salvation somehow. In the process, God soon gets left out. The gospel is made more appealing and suited to the culture. It becomes about people's works and people's desires. It soon is not about Jesus and the cross anymore.

It would seem so simple. Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead. He saved us from sin and gave us what we needed for a joy-filled life 2000 years ago. Our struggle is that the gospel offends our pride because it says that we can't save ourselves. The gospel offends our wisdom since it spares us by something that many think is foolish. For those who will accept the gospel, it is an incredible comfort when things are not going well or when we face sin and death. The cross covers our sins and lets us know that we are not alone in this world. Easter promises that we have a life after death and hope for the future. We are forgiven and restored, and it is all a gift. Our faith is in Jesus. Nothing else is needed. It may seem too easy, but it is more than enough.

1. How often do you write letters to other people? When you write, how do you start the letter?

Read Gal. 1:1-10

2. Verse 1. How does Paul describe himself? Where does Paul get his authority?

3. Verse 4. What does Paul declare about Jesus? How important is that truth to our faith?

4. Verse 6. What has Paul heard that shocks him? How long has he been away from the Galatians?

5. Verse 6. What is at stake if a person doesn't believe the gospel is enough? What are the dangers?

6. How is the gospel offensive to many in our culture?

7. Verse 7. How confusing would it be to be told that you have to keep all the Old Testament laws to be saved? How does that contradict the gospel?

8. Verse 7. Why do you think that the gospel is so hard for some people to believe? What are some things that we believe in that we can't understand?

9. What do people who reject the gospel think will save them?

10. Verse 8-9. How important is it to share the gospel accurately? What is the punishment for twisting the gospel?

11. Verse 8. How is the twisting of the truth more difficult to spot than an outright lie?

12. Verse 10. What accusations do you think were made against Paul? How does Paul defend himself?

13. Is the gospel enough? How does it give comfort in times of trouble?

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1. Why is it important to remember that salvation is the work of Jesus and not our work?

Deep 2. What steps will you take when it seems that a message may not be valid? How will you know what God said and what is the voice of others?

Deep 3. Who might you write or speak to who is struggling with the truth? What do you think you need to tell them that you learned from Paul?

2 Who is welcome?

Gal. 2:11-21

Everyone needs the grace that only Jesus can give.

It was Peter's second denial of Jesus. He had come to Antioch to see the exciting things happening in this church. Antioch had a church filled with Jews and Gentiles, all living in grace as equals. Peter ate with them until a group of strict Jews came to visit. Then Peter withdrew from the Gentiles and refused to eat with them. Freedom had turned to fear. Jesus had freed Peter from the law in Acts 10 when Peter had been given a vision by God and told to eat with the Gentile Cornelius. Now He was afraid of the Jews and wanted to exclude those who the Jews thought were imperfect. He failed the church by putting his trust in the law instead of the gospel. Sadly, others followed him in his hypocrisy. His actions divided the church as the Jews turned their backs on their friends. Paul took him to the task and showed him that everyone is equal in the church.

The church still struggles with who is welcome. It is uncomfortable to worship with people who come dirty to church or who have broken lives. We need to remember the freedom that Jesus has given us. Worshipping with people of a rainbow of colors and nationalities who are all part of the greater church brings joy. Sadly, we get uncomfortable with people who are less than perfect. We struggle with the needy person who lives in poverty or the couple living together. Are they welcome in our church so that they can rebuild their lives in Jesus? We need to remember that we are saved by grace just as they are. There are always broken parts to our lives that God and others forgive. We need to forgive others who are not so perfect as well. We need to forgive lest we lead others to condemn them, too. God loves the broken and wants us to reach out to them as brothers and sisters since we all need the forgiveness and healing of Jesus.

The motivation for admitting others is because Christ has accepted us. If we are honest, there are so many things that Jesus has done for us through our lives. He has helped us raise our family and be a good employee at our job. Jesus has given us values in His word and a purpose in life. We draw close to our God because of all the good things that He has done for us. The broken and hurting around us need that gift as much as we do. Jesus is their only hope for healing in lives that are not right. We must embrace them and help them. As a Lutheran, I cherish the gift of grace without strings. Luther beat himself and never felt he was righteous enough until he understood grace in the book of Romans. We are his beneficiaries. We can say to Satan and to others who accuse us that the cross forgives us. We have the chance to welcome others into that grace so that they can let the Lord rebuild their lives. Let us welcome them into God's presence so that they may feel God's grace as we have.

1. What divisions do you see in our culture? How do people often treat people who live or think differently than they do?

Read Gal. 2:11-21

2. Verse 12. What was Peter's behavior like before and after the strict Jews came?

3. Verse 12 What did Peter's actions infer to the other Christians?

4. Verse 13. How did Peter's actions influence other Christians?

5. Verse 13. What do you think would have happened in Antioch if Paul had not opposed Peter?
6. How do you know when to stand your ground and when to quietly show grace to others who say or do wrong things?
7. Verse 14. In Acts 10, Peter had a vision from God. How did it affect his freedom in the gospel?
8. Verse 16. How is Peter following the law and not the gospel? What are the consequences when we follow that decision?
9. Verse 16. What difference does it make that we live by grace and not by the law?
10. Verse 17. How can we live in grace if we still sin? Don't we need the law because the gospel is too easy?
11. Verse 20 How has life changed because of Jesus? How do we now see ourselves?
12. What does it mean to live by faith and grace? How does that affect how we see others?
13. If the church separates itself from those who are less than perfect, how does that take away the gospel?

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1. Why do you think it is easier for people to live by rules than to trust that God will save them by the cross?

Deep 2. What are some of the good deeds that you do in response to the grace God has given you?

Deep 3. What is one way that you can show someone else who is struggling in their faith that they are essential to you and the Lord?

3. Does God keep His promises?

Gal. 3:15-25

Big idea: God does keep His promises every day

Paul had been preaching the gospel. The Judaizers said, “Wait, what about the law?” They contended that the gospel was Ok but that it couldn’t set aside the law given to Moses centuries before Jesus came. A true believer must be circumcised, eat kosher foods, and keep the Sabbath. Paul begins his argument by showing that the promise kept in Jesus came to Abraham centuries before Moses received the law. The gospel came first, and the law can’t set it aside. When God makes a promise, He will keep it and not change His promise. The law came years later to help people see that they needed the gospel. The people had slowly forgotten God in Egypt and acted like they didn’t need Him. The law was given to show humanity how sinful he was and that he needed a savior. The law would lead people to the gospel by showing them that they could not save themselves. The law can’t save us. It shows us that we need to be set free by the gospel.

People still struggle with the relationship between the law and the gospel. A lot of people walk away from the church because they don’t think that they can ever be good enough for God. Some denominations act like the gospel isn’t enough. You have to add rules for people to keep so that they are good enough to be saved. We have to understand that we can never do enough to be delivered by the law. The law expects a perfection that we can never accomplish. Rather than softening the law so that we can somehow keep it, we need to let the law lead us to the gospel. Once we have recognized that we are wretched sinners, we will be ready to throw ourselves on the mercy of God at the cross. The law has the purpose of nagging our conscience until we admit that we need the gospel. When we have been saved from sin, the law then shows us the blessings of living as a person who is not trapped by lust, greed, anger, or a host of other sins. It shows us what it means to live as people free from guilt and living in the love of Jesus.

The law must be put in its proper place. It was never meant to supplant the gospel but to prepare us for the promises of God given to us in the cross. Without the law, how would we ever know that we needed the gospel? God wanted more for us than to be trapped in our sins and our sinful emotions. He freed us by the cross. He would wipe away the past sins and prepare us for a relationship with Him built on His love. The law helped us to see what life was without God and what it could be if we were to live with Him and rely on Him all our lives. Everything would be based on His promises and not on our ability to keep the law perfectly. What a joy that is for our lives. We are imperfect and break the law and our promises all the time. The promise of God, which was first given to Adam and then to Abraham, is something on which we can rely. God welcomes us into His kingdom in spite of our sins. He loves us and sacrificed His Son so we can have a life that we could never have without him.

1. How good are you at keeping your promises? What is the last promise you made to yourself or to someone else that you never kept?

Read Gal. 3:15-25

2. Verse 16. Which came first, according to Paul, the law or the gospel? Why does it matter?

3. Verse 16. Through whom were the promises to Abraham fulfilled?

4. Verse 17. Why can't the law change the conditions for salvation? Why does that matter to us?

5. Verse 17. Why can't the law save us? Can we ever do enough good to satisfy God's requirements?

6. How would you convince a friend that good works are the way to be saved?

7. Verse 19. God gave the law through a mediator. Who was that mediator, and why was the law given if it didn't offer salvation?

8. Verse 19. What traps do we fall into when we think that the gospel is not enough for salvation?

9. Verse 22. How does the law pave the way for the gospel?

10. Why is it essential that we believe the promises of the gospel? What happens if we think that God is more focused on law than on the gospel?

11. Verse 24. Ultimately, what is the purpose of the law for those who have already been saved?

12. Verse 24. How is the law like a tutor that leads us to the gospel?

13. How would you sum up the relationship of the law to the gospel based on Paul's arguments?

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1. Where do you find yourself not feeling good enough for God? How is that the law speaking and not the gospel?

Deep 2. How has the gospel set you free from guilt and from feelings of just not being good enough?

Deep 3. How do you want to respond to this gift of the gospel? What are you free to do now that you don't have to live in guilt?

4. Is Christianity just a bunch of rules?

Gal. 4:21-31

Big idea: Grace should be how people know us.

Paul is distressed that the Galatians have traded in grace for a set of rules. While rules are simpler to grasp, faith is the path of freedom and joy. To help the people see why faith is better, Paul sets out four contrasts between authentic faith and pious rules using the Old Testament story of Hagar and Sarah from the book of Genesis. Paul begins by looking at how grace gives freedom, and religious laws enslave us. Isaac was the child of a free woman named Sarah, while Ishmael was the child of the slave woman Hagar. Those who live by the rules will be enslaved by them. He continues by showing that children of faith are children of promise. Isaac's birth was a miracle while Ishmael was born because Abraham doubted God and took matters into his own hands. Finally, Isaac received all of Abraham's inheritance while Ishmael received nothing. Faith brings God's love and blessings in a way that rule keepers will never know.

People wrongly see the church as keepers of a bunch of outdated rules. Nothing could be further from the truth. If people have that impression, 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. Legalism still enslaves people as they try to keep laws that they will never be able to obey. Faith frees people. Christians know that Jesus has done everything necessary for salvation. We live by the promise and expect that God has done what is required for our salvation. We don't feel that we need to keep some rules to have God's love. We already have that love in the cross of Jesus. Like Isaac, we are given the blessings of God through faith. Those who try to gain God's favor by keeping the rules will live in fear and doubt. Faith brings everything, and false piety is just an empty shell without God.

The highest service the church can do for others is to emphasize grace and not the rules. If the world thinks they need to earn God's favor, then we have failed them and failed our Lord. People will doubt themselves and God's mercy. They need the grace that only the cross can give. So let your light shine with God's grace so that every church becomes known for the love of Jesus that grace provides. 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. Grace trumps rules. When the people of God live by grace and not the law, they attract others to the Lord. People who are living in doubt and fear because they can't keep the law are released by the gospel to live as people of God. As the church lives in faith to Christ, we see that no person needs to earn God's favor. We already have it.

1. When you were growing up, who was the favorite child? What makes you think so?

Read Gal. 4:21-31

2. Verse 22. What story does Paul use to illustrate the difference between grace and law? What is the difference in standing between Abraham's two sons?

3. Verse 22. What difference does it make whether you live by faith or by the law?

4. Verse 23. How were the two sons conceived? What makes the free son special?

- 5. How does living under the law or gospel change our expectations of what is necessary to please God?**
- 6. Verse 24. How does Hagar represent the law given to the Israelites on Mt. Sinai?**
- 7. Verse 26-8. How are Christians like Sarah and Isaac? What is the promise that we have?**
- 8. Verse 29. How were the Judaizers like Ismael in their treatment of the children of promise? (See Gen 21:8-10)**
- 9. Verse 29. How do we cause pain to each other when we impose rules as a means to prove one's salvation?**
- 10. Verse 30. How is the inheritance of the law different from the inheritance of the gospel?**
- 11. Verse 30. What blessings can you expect as a child of God by faith? What happens if we compromise our teachings and give in to the Judaizers of our day?**
- 12. Why should the church emphasize grace and not the rules of the law?**
- 13. How can people of grace help those who think Christianity is about working your way to heaven by keeping the rules?**

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1. Reread the story of Ishmael and Isaac in Gen. 21:1-21. How is Isaac, the son of promise? What is the reaction of Ishmael to having a younger brother who is now the heir?

Deep 2. How do you respond to the freedom that you have in the gospel? How do you depend on the Lord for help today and for a brighter future tomorrow?

Deep 3. Who do you know who are trapped in keeping the rules? How could you help them see that Jesus has done it all for them so that they can have your joy?

5. Living by the spirit

Gal. 5:16-26

Big idea: How can God expect me to be different?

Your life is a battlefield as you are pulled one way by your conscience and the other way by your emotions and desires. Paul describes the battle as Satan wants to pull you away from every good desire, and God wants to change you to be more like Him. It would seem hopeless, but we have a helper in the Holy Spirit who fights Satan's lies and strengthens you when you face temptations. We often give in because it is so hard to be part of that battle. Sadly, the sins that can result when we let Satan take control are frightening, and all have bitter consequences that can destroy our lives and the lives of those we love. There is an alternative. When the Spirit is in control, the fruit of such an experience are things like love, peace, and kindness. These are the qualities that we would like in our friends. Here God is offering to make them part of the new you. How can that happen? It happens as the power of the cross becomes stronger and stronger in you. The cross is stronger than Satan and guilt and can free you from their control. In the Holy Spirit, you can live a new life without fear and bondage to sin.

A lot of people think that the Christian life is too hard and the rules for living are too tricky. They don't understand what it means to be a Christian. Faith brings freedom from the guilt of our sins and the control of Satan. In this battle for our lives, we have a clear choice. We can let sin and Satan control us, or we can see the help of the Holy Spirit so that we can live differently. The holy lives that are impossible for us are learned and accomplished with the help of the Holy Spirit. He will bring the truth when Satan lies and give you strength when temptation is about to take control of you. Instead of being trapped in sins like the ones that Paul lists here, you will be a person with qualities that others will want for themselves. Life will be better as you live out the fruit of the Spirit. Your kindness and patience will become a model for others at work. Your love will fill your marriage and family so that you feel their love in return. At first, you may wonder how this can be. Just think about the demons that Jesus cast out of people with a simple word and no sweat. He still has the power to overcome the demons in our world. When we are in the word, and at the cross, Satan finds it harder to defeat us.

The path of the Christian life is more straightforward than many want to make it out to be. Paul says that we need to walk with the Holy Spirit. He will convince us that forgiveness is ours because of the cross. He will warn us of Satan's temptations and teach us to live differently. Nowhere does the Bible tell us that we have to change by our power. We walk with the Holy Spirit as our friend and guide in life, and soon we have distanced ourselves from Satan and are becoming a kinder, gentler, and more confident person in Christ. The change will be amazing. You will live without the guilt of the past, for Jesus forgives it. You will have peace and joy each day because the Lord is at your side. You will have confidence in your future because you know that God will be with you throughout your life and will take you to heaven as well. In a world filled with ugliness and uncertainty, you will be different. Life will be a slice of heaven here on earth. You will still have problems, but you will have a friend walking with you who will help you through them.

1. What benefits do you find in having close friendships? What would life be like if you could not depend on others?

Read Gal. 5:16-26

2. Verse 17. What two opponents battle for your life and your future?

- 3. Verse 17. How does the Holy Spirit help you in this battle for your soul and your life?**
- 4. What would it be like to live without fearing the law and your past mistakes?**
- 5. Verse 19. What does life look like when Satan and the sinful nature take control?**
- 6. Verse 19. How does the world justify the sins mentioned? Does the justification of these sins make things better?**
- 7. Verse 21. What are the consequences of letting the sinful nature rule you? What is at stake here?**
- 8. Verse 22-23. What does life look like when you are bearing the fruit of the Spirit?**
- 9. Verse 22-23. What can life be like when the Spirit is in control and helping you to have the qualities listed here?**
- 10. Verse 24. How is it possible to live a life so different than the world around us?**
- 11. How can we be sure that the Holy Spirit can free us from Satan and his temptations?**
- 12. Verse 25. What is the path to this new life defeating the sinful nature and living by the Spirit?**
- 13. What would it be like having a friend like the Holy Spirit to help you every day of your life?**

For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1. What acts of the sinful nature are your greatest temptations? How have they impacted your life and the lives of those you love?

Deep 2. In what way do the fruits of the Spirit have to grow in life? What experiences have you had that have helped you grow in your character?

Deep 3. Which one of the fruits of the Spirit do you desire most? Why?

6. Doing good Galatians 6:1-10

Big idea: Why do I need to help others to be a Christian?

Paul finishes his discourse on law and gospel by sharing the difference between how the law and gospel deal with someone who is overwhelmed by sin. Surely the law would judge those who do not keep it entirely and be done with them. The gospel has a different desire. It wants to save the brother and restore him or her to the church. Paul begins by admonishing us to work to restore the brother while being careful that we don't fall into the same temptation. Every person has their faults and their pet sins. Our job is not to condemn them but rather to help them overcome their sins. Sometimes that means we have to help them with the burdens that weigh them down by caring for them in unusual ways during their time of recovery. We do so because we realize that we are not perfect either. We all sin, and we support each other, knowing that there may be a time that others may need to support us.

None of us are perfect either. There are new Christians in our midst who are just learning what it means to be a Christian. They swear and are living among broken relationships that often weigh them down. There are long-time Christians who mess up their lives. They have anger issues or marriages on the rocks. They know what they should be doing but are finding it hard to live the life that they want. It would be easy to toss them aside, but the gospel tells us that we need to find ways to encourage and help them. Pride could fill you like the Pharisee of Luke 18:11, who looks down on the tax collector near him. It would be better to do what Jesus would do and care for those who are struggling so that there will be people who will help us when we are struggling. We help those with self-inflicted pain and victims of the world's evil and troubles. Law condemns the less than perfect. The gospel lifts them.

The church should be a place for people to find help. Its natural state is to be filled with sinners seeking the mercy and assistance of our savior, not a place of refuge for the perfect who do not need God's grace. Christ would have us invest in each other. He uses the example of planting and reaping to show that those who sow the gospel love in their world will have a bigger chance of receiving such love for themselves. When we plant the love of God in our universe, we raise others who can love and care for us when we need it. By investing, we let the Lord magnify our feeble efforts. He can take the little love we give and work miracles. As each person sows the love of God instead of the harshness of the law, the church will have an abundant harvest of love and care. We may even be surprised at its depth. Sometimes that investment takes time just as seeds don't come up immediately in our garden. Don't be tired, and don't give up. It will take longer than you think to help others but know that God is working even if you can't see Him. He will change lives if we apply love and not just the law.

1. What do you find hardest about serving other people?

Read Galatians 6:1-10

2. Verse 1. What is our responsibility to one another in Christ? How is that an act of grace?

3. Why is it so hard to help others? What is the alternative?

4. Verse 2. What is the law of Christ (Gal. 5:14), and why should it encourage us to carry someone's burdens?

5. Verse 2. Why is it important to let others help us with our burdens, and what kind of attitude is needed for such help to be given and received?

6. Verse 3-4. Why must we discard pride if we are going to be servants and burden bearers for others?

7. Verse 1-5. How do we overcome pride according to Paul in these verses?

8. Verse 6. What is the relationship between giving and honoring those who help us? How does giving allow us to help people no one person can serve alone?

9. Verse 7. How is helping others an investment? What is the harvest that we may reap if we care for others?

10. Verse 7. How is God able to take our investment in others and bring a better return than we ever imagined?

11. Verse 9. What danger does Paul mention that we all face when we help others with their burdens?

12. How does the example of sowing and reaping help us when we find ourselves impatient and ready to quit?

13. Is the Christian life just between God and me? Why is it important to include others?

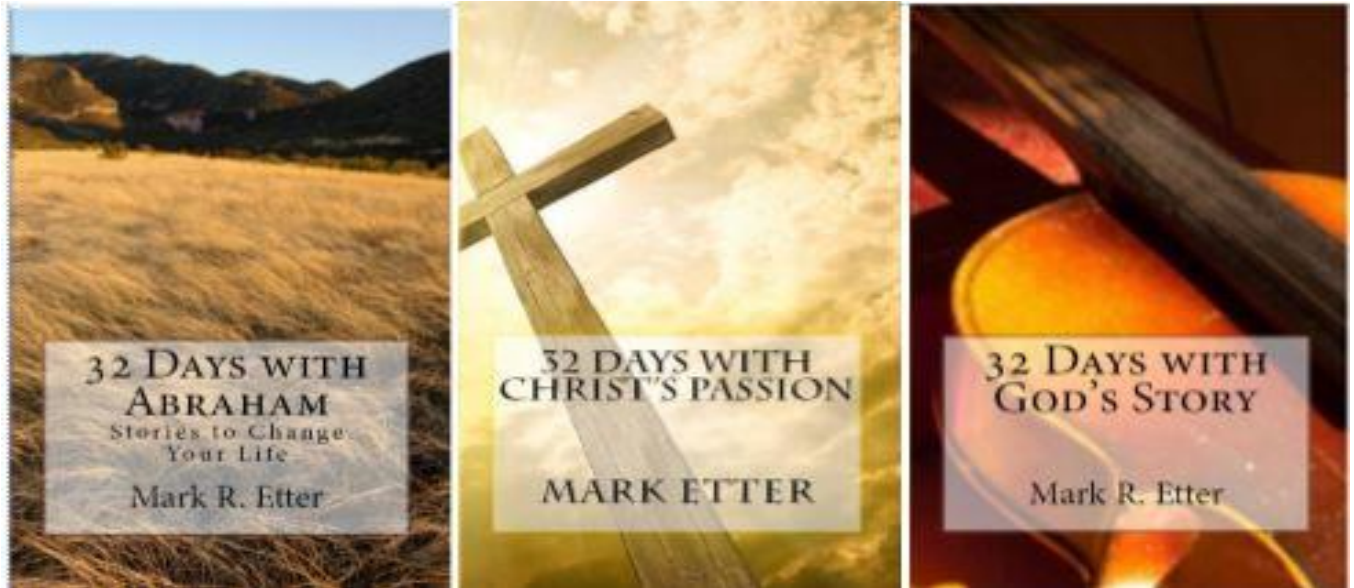
For now or later - taking the next step

Deep 1. What is the best approach to help a brother or sister struggling with a burden?

Deep 2. What keeps you serving others even when you would rather give up?

Deep 3. Who do you know who could use some “tender loving care”? What is one thing you could do that would bring God’s healing to them?

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About the author

Rev. Mark Etter has been a pastor for over thirty-five years and is currently the pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church in Erlanger, KY. Rev. Etter has published several books of Adult Bible studies and numerous devotions and youth studies with Concordia Publishing House in St. Louis. He has been active in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod as an LWML counselor, evangelism chairman, coach for pastors and circuit counselor. He is currently serving part-time as a regional facilitator for the Ohio District of the LCMS. He and his wife, Joan, have three grown children and two grandchildren.

Did you know?

How well do you know the messages of the upper room? Here are seven questions that are answered in this study. The page and question number in this study are given after each question.

1. What has Paul heard about the Galatians that shocks him? (Page 6, Question 4)
2. When should you stand your ground and when should you show grace when others say or do wrong things? (Page 10, Question 6)
3. Which came first, the law or the gospel? (Page 14, Question 2)
4. What is the relationship of the law to the gospel? (Page 16, Question 13)
5. Why should the church emphasize grace and not the rules of the law? (Page 20, Question 12)
6. How does the Holy Spirit help you in the battle for your soul and life? (Page 22, Question 3)
7. How does grace allow us to help others with their burdens when the law can't do so? (Page 26, Question 5)

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