

Growing in Grace

Lesson # 5

"Squaring Off Against Legalism"

Selected Scriptures from Galatians

[Based on "The Grace Awakening" by Charles Swindoll, Chapter Five (Dallas: Word, 1990) pp. 75-99]

Introduction

Liberty is Worth Fighting For! Perhaps it is the very reason why young men go into battle against other nations. On March 23, 1775, a young 39-year-old radical-thinking attorney made a speech that prompted a historical activity. *"If we wish to be free...we must fight! I repeat it, sir, we must fight! An appeal to arms, and to the God of hosts, is all that is left us...It is vain, sir, to extenuate the matter. The gentlemen may cry, Peace, peace! but there is no peace. The war has actually begun!...Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle?...Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God. I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"* (Patrick Henry) [Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, 15th edition, rev. and enl., ed. Emily Morison Beck (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co., 1980), p. 383. As quoted by Charles Swindoll in "The Grace Awakening." p.75] We applaud these words of Patrick Henry. He goes down in our minds as a national hero.

Just 90 years later, we were again fighting for liberty in the Civil War. Charles Sumner said, *"Where Slavery is, there Liberty cannot be; and where Liberty is, there Slavery cannot be."* (November 5, 1864) [Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, p. 539 As quoted by Charles Swindoll in "The Grace Awakening." p. 76.]

Why aren't we as willing to fight for our Christian liberty? We'll fight any nation who threatens our national freedom. Yet, in the church, if enough legalist come aboard, we'll give them the ship. S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. wrote these words in "The Paralysis of Legalism": *"One of the most serious problems facing the orthodox Christian church today is the problem of legalism. One of the most serious problems facing the church in Paul's day was the problem of legalism. In every day it is the same. Legalism wrenches the joy of the Lord from the Christian believer, and with the joy of the Lord goes his power for vital worship and vibrant service. Nothing is left but cramped, somber, dull and listless profession. The truth is betrayed, and the glorious name of the Lord becomes a synonym for a gloomy killjoy. The Christian under law is a miserable parody of the real thing."* [S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., "The Paralysis of Legalism," Bibliotheca Sacra, April-June 1963, p. 109 As quoted by Charles Swindoll in "The Grace Awakening." pp. 76-77]

If I were to list the top five enemies of the church today... Legalism would be #1! Legalism is a killer! It kills a congregation when a preacher is a legalist. It kills preachers when

congregations are legalists.

It is all about Legalism versus Grace (Galatians 5:1). *“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.”*

“Stand fast or Stand firm for what?” – LIBERTY! Nothing disturbs the legalist like the doctrine of grace. Nothing puts the death-nail to legalism like a firm conviction of the grace of God. Paul wrote this letter to Christians who had fallen into the hands of legalists.

I. DEFINING TWO SIGNIFICANT TERMS

A. LIBERTY (it is freedom FROM something and TO something) It is freedom from: Slavery; From Bondage; From Sin’s power and guilt; From God’s wrath; From Satanic and demonic authority; From The curse of the Law and the tyranny of its demands; From Fear of condemnation and the demands of other people; and From Slavery of other human opinions!

What is liberty’s motivation? LOVE! It is built upon a trust relationship. It is the freedom to: Enjoy the rights and privileges of being out from under slavery; To Enjoy the rights and privileges of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross; To Live in and enjoy the kind of power only Christ could bring; To Become all that He meant me to be regardless of how He leads others; To Know Him in an independent and personal way (God isn’t stamping out little Christians all over the world who look alike, talk alike, think alike, teach alike, and like the same things! God is pleased with variety!); To BE; To Make choices; To Know His will, walk in it and obey Him! Again I say, “Liberty is worth fighting for!”

B. LEGALISM is essentially it is an attitude or mentality. Legalism is an obsessive conformity to a standard for the purpose of exalting self. Legalist “do” or “don’t do” things because they were passed down to them (not outlined in Scripture)

What is legalism’s motivation? GUILT and FEAR! Legalists put an emphasis on what should NOT be or what one should NOT do. Eugene Peterson writes: *“The word ‘Christian’ means different things to different people. To one person, it means a stiff, uptight, inflexible way of life—colorless and unbending. To another, it means a risky, surprised-filled venture, lived on tiptoe at the edge of expectation. Either of these pictures can be supported with evidence. There are numberless illustrations for either position in congregations all over the world. But if we restrict ourselves to biblical evidence, only the second image can be supported. The image of a person living zestfully, exploring every experience—pain and joy, enigma and insight, fulfillment and frustration—as a dimension of human freedom, searching through each for sense and grace. If we get our info from the biblical material, there is no doubt—I repeat—there is no doubt that the Christian life is a dancing, leaping, daring life!”* [Eugene Peterson. *Traveling Light. (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard Pub., 1988)* As quoted by Charles Swindoll in *“The Grace Awakening.” Pp. 82-83.*]

Why would people who have tasted the fresh water of liberty ever want to return to the stagnant pools of legalism? The heresy of legalism is so enticing, promising to quench their thirst for acceptance from their peers. But the promise is like an ocean of salt water to a parched tongue.

Paul chastised those in Galatia who had lowered their cups into legalism's saline waters. Listen to some of what Paul said about their return to legalism: Galatians 5:7 *"You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?"* or *"You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?"* (NIV) or *"You were getting along so well. Who has interfered with you to hold you back from following the truth?"* (NLT)

In Galatians 3:1 he says, *"O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified?"* Or *"You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified."* (NIV) Or *"Oh, foolish Galatians! What magician has hypnotized you and cast an evil spell upon you? For you used to see the meaning of Jesus Christ's death as clearly as though I had waved a placard before you with a picture on it of Christ dying on the cross."* (TLB) The Philips translation translates (*anoetoi*) translated in the NKJV as "foolish" as "idiots"

Paul had previously said in Galatians 1:6, *"I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel,* also translated as *"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel..."* (NIV)

How is it that the legalists infiltrate the church? Let's identify 3 subtle inroads they use...]

II. IDENTIFYING THREE SUBTLE ADVERSARIES

A. Those who disturb and distort through HERESY (Gal. 1:6-10) *"I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, (7) which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. (8) But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. (9) As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed. (10) For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ."*

Paul wastes no time getting at the heart of the heresy. After five verses of introduction, he rolls up his sleeves and gets right to work. In (v. 6) he says that the Gospel is a Gospel of grace: Christ's death on the cross was a sufficient payment for sin; His blood was the final payment that freed us from slavery; His resurrection was God's "Amen" to Christ's "It is finished." It was God's way of saying, by bringing him back from the grave, "Your death is sufficient to satisfy My wrath. And from now on, all who come to You — Jesus Christ—have My blessing. I declare righteous those who come to Christ based on your blood given for them, paying for their sins." It is called being ransomed from slavery. He paid the price and made us free.

What does it take, then to have that kind of eternal life? It takes faith! No works, no long lists of "I promise," no number of attendance at church, no christening, no giving up, no adding to. It takes trusting Jesus Christ alone and His payment at the cross to cover your

sins...and you had eternal life. That's the grace of Christ.

Almost every cult is a cult of works, because it appeals to the flesh. Legalists say that if you work, you can add to the work of Christ. *"I can believe more easily that if I pushed a peanut with my nose from New York to LA, I'd get into heaven than if I simply took a gift. If I could just DO something to get into heaven, it would make more sense."* All of life is built upon working and getting paid for extra work. Eternal life then cannot be free, can it? Oh, you forgot...it isn't free. Christ paid the payment. It cost Him His life. From our perspective it is free

In Paul's day, they were expecting Moses to finish the job of Christ on the cross by observing the law (circumcision, abstain from certain foods, etc.) Let's stop tolerating the doctrine or works—it's legalism. Legalists prey on weak people.

B. Those who spy and enslave through HARASSMENT (Gal. 2:1-5)

As we wade into the second chapter, the swamp of legalism grows deeper and thicker, threatening to suck us under into the morass.

"Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with me. (2) And I went up by revelation, and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain. (3) Yet not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. (4) And this occurred because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), (5) to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you."

Eugene Peterson writes, *"There are people who do not want us to be free. They don't want us to be free before God, accepted just as we are by His grace. They don't want us to be free to express our faith originally and creatively in the world. They want to control us. They want to use us for their own purposes. They themselves refuse to live arduously and openly in faith, but huddle together with a few others, and try to get a sense of approval by insisting that all look alike, talk alike and act alike, thus validating one another's worth. They try to enlarge their numbers only on the condition that new members act, talk and behave the way they do. These people infiltrate communities of faith "to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus" and not infrequently find ways to control, strict, and reduce the lives of free Christians."* [Peterson. p. 67. As quoted by Charles Swindoll in *"The Grace Awakening."* P. 92]

Illustration: A missionary couple quit full-time mission work because the place where they worked didn't allow peanut butter because they couldn't get it there. This couple loved peanut butter and had it shipped to them from the states. The harassment became so bad, that it finished them off spiritually. You'll laugh at peanut butter until I mention what is on your list? Would you please give up your list? Keep it for yourself, but don't give it to me.

Illustration: A man attended a school where they weren't allowed to do anything on Sunday. He saw his wife out hanging the laundry on Sunday afternoon and he turned her in. Has our faith been reduced to who does what when according to what I think they should do, or is it a faith

that is based firmly in Scripture? Liberty—I repeat—is worth fighting for!

C. Those who lie and deceive through HYPOCRISY (Gal. 2:11-14). The heresy of legalism that led to the harassment of Gentile believers also revealed the hypocrisy that existed within the very highest echelons of the leadership of the church—Peter himself!

“Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; (12) for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. (13) And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. (14) But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, “If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?”

Peter had been eating with the Gentiles until the Jews showed up. Swindoll says it this way, *“Peter, I smell ham on your breath! You forgot your breathsavers! There was a time when you wouldn’t eat ham as part of your hope of salvation, and then after you trusted Christ, it didn’t matter if you ate ham. But now when the no-ham-eaters come from Jerusalem, you’ve gone back to your kosher ways. But the smell of ham still lingers on your breath. You are most inconsistent. You are compelling Gentile believers to observe Jewish law, which can never justify anyone. Peter, by returning to the Law, you undercut straight for Godly living.”* [Swindoll. pp. 95-96]

Paul rebuked the hypocrisy in Peter (v. 14) . *“If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?”* Paul was fighting for freedom!

Conclusion

Specifying Four Strong Defenses.

[Don’t ever forget that you are free and that this freedom is worth fighting for. To relinquish it is to give it back hard-fought territory to the enemy—legalism. You don’t want your relationship with Christ to be relegated to a rigid set of religious rules. You don’t want the new wine that flows so freely from the Lord to be closed up tight, in some old, cracked wineskins. You want to be free and to be everything God created you to be—not poured into someone else’s plastic mold.]

1. Keep standing firm in your freedom. If the group you’re in is giving you grief for not living up to their convictions, get out of the group. It’s wrong to subject yourself to a group that doesn’t respect your convictions and that violates your conscience.
2. Stop seeking the favor of everyone. Seek the favor of God alone rather than looking to other people for approval—no matter how spiritual they may seem.
3. Start refusing to submit to bondage. Call it what it is—slavery. It is spirituality on the basis of pleasing your neighbor.
4. Continue being straightforward about the truth. Live honestly. When you fall on your face, admit it.

Paul Turney wrote this in his book, *“Guilt and Grace”*: *“In all fields, even those in culture and art, other people’s judgement exercises a paralyzing effect. Fear of criticism kills*

spontaneity; it prevents men from showing themselves and expressing themselves freely as they are. Much courage is needed to paint a picture, to write a book, to erect a building designed along new architectural lines, or to formulate an independent opinion or an original idea.” [Paul Turney. Guilt and Grace. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) p. 98. As quoted by Chuck Swindoll in “The Grace Awakening” p. 99]

When will we have the courage to believe God above everyone else’s opinions? When will we learn to live as free as God has made us to be? From now on, let’s not be afraid to fight for our liberty. Do you today need to give up the legalistic personality in you? Have you realized how much of your Christian life is just a list of rules and regulations? Christ has set you free from that!