

LESSON ONE

Battle Cry of a Freedom Fighter

Paul's doctrine of justification by faith, as set forth in Galatians and more completely in Romans, was forged in the context of a life-and-death struggle with those who would pervert the gospel by minimizing the decisive character of God's grace in the person and work of his Son. —TIMOTHY GEORGE



Have you noticed that many former “whatevers” tend to become the “whatevers’ ” most active opponents? If you know any former smokers, you know what I mean. Most of them work overtime trying to get others to quit. So do former drug abusers, workaholics, and overeaters.

Most of these people act out of compassion for those who are in bondage to something from which they themselves have been freed. They understand what it is like to live chained to an addiction, and they know, for a fact, that those chains can be broken. They want to help those who still groan under the weight of shackled potential, those whose spirits are still bound by futility, those whose “reason for being” is still being defined by oppressive constraint. They want folks to live free of whatever is tying them down.

Former “whatevers” are chain breakers and freedom fighters. They have broken free of some kind of bondage and now battle to help others do the same thing. When we read Galatians, we see that Paul was one of them. His “whatever” was legalism—a bondage more devastating than all others combined. Although all forms of bondage cripple Christian witness, legalism eats away at the heart of the gospel. It erases grace as the means of salvation and service, substitutes works as the way to find favor with God, and expects God to share His glory with fallen humanity.

Paul had been liberated from the chains of works-righteousness and fought to free others held captive by it. His only weapon was God’s gospel of grace. He knew, from experience, that he needed no other. If God’s grace had freed him, it could free anyone. Paul had once been an outstanding legalist because he had “a mind to put confidence in the flesh.” He had been “circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless” (Philippians 3:4–6).

But when Paul met Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, his “confidence in the flesh” left him face down in the dirt.

God weakened his flesh, ransomed his heart, and shattered his bondage to legalism. In the ensuing days, God helped Paul see that he could be saved not by “a righteousness of [his] own derived from the Law,” but only by having “the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith” in the atonement of Christ (v. 9).

Paul got the message, and he never forgot it. The heart of his preaching from that moment on was that no one could be justified (made right) with God by keeping the law (Romans 3:20). Instead, sinners must *receive* righteousness “as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (v. 24).

God also taught Paul that he could not walk worthy of his high calling by works-righteousness either. He had been called to be God’s chosen instrument, an apostle, “to bear [His] name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.” And he had been told he would suffer greatly for the sake of that name (Acts 9:15–16). His worldly credentials had not qualified him for the job he had been given. His natural abilities would not equip and sustain him in the trials that were coming. His only qualification and power would be God’s grace working in him.

God’s Holy Spirit helped Paul understand his complete dependence on grace. That understanding transformed the apostle’s self-image so thoroughly that he wrote to the Corinthians: “For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me” (1 Corinthians 15:9–10).¹

Paul went on to preach God’s gospel of grace faithfully in the region of Galatia. Many folks living in the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe received the Good

News with joy and were saved to serve God. They had run well for a time, but had inexplicably veered into the path of an oncoming truck labeled “Legalism.” Judaizers had infiltrated their churches, undermined Paul’s authority, and enticed them with law-keeping. Word got back to Paul, and he sprang into action. Seizing pen, ink, and parchment, he scrawled the terse, pointed sentences that open the book of Galatians.²

Stop now and reread Paul’s words in Galatians 1:1–9 before going on with this lesson. I hope that as you read, you will hear, as I do, the battle cry of a freedom fighter.

Remember Me?—The Apostle Paul

Galatians 1:1–2

Paul’s opening salvo reads like an e-mail message written “all-caps.” It shouts loud enough to demand undivided attention. I am sure Paul did that intentionally because he saw himself as a lifeline for endangered brethren. Since their rescue depended upon hearing and heeding what he had to say, he began by asserting his apostolic authority.

Most of us, almost unconsciously, recognize legitimate authority and submit ourselves to it. When we approach an intersection and see that the traffic signal is out of order and that a police officer is giving direction to drivers, we comply. When I was a child and heard my father’s voice calling me home, I went. When your work supervisor instructs you to complete Task A before beginning Task B, you plan your day accordingly.

But what do we do when authoritative directions conflict? What if the traffic signal is working and “red,” but a police officer is motioning for you to keep moving? What about when my father called me home an hour before the time my mother

said I could stay out? What if *your* supervisor says, “Do Task A first,” but then *her* supervisor says to you, “Do Task B first”?

That is precisely the predicament the Galatians were in. The apostle Paul had preached the gospel to them, and they had accepted it. Then other authoritative teachers had come and “corrected” Paul’s gospel, and they had accepted that too. Then they had received an angry letter from Paul saying that they had been deceived by the other teachers into believing “another gospel,” which was no gospel at all. Both Paul and the other teachers seemed to be godly, intelligent men who argued their cases plausibly and winsomely. Whom should they believe? Whom should they follow?

Paul commanded them to listen to him because he spoke with the authority of a Christ-appointed apostle,³ whereas the other teachers did not. Christ-appointed apostles were men who had been particularly chosen, equipped, and sent to proclaim divine truth “not . . . from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead” (1:1). Christ-appointed apostles were the final authority on subjects about which God had revealed His will. On those subjects, they did not speak their own thoughts or the thoughts of any other human beings. Rather, they were “moved by the Holy Spirit [to speak] from God” (2 Peter 1:20–21). When people disagree with a Christ-appointed apostle concerning revelation from God, they are wrong.

Paul did not assert his apostolic authority to thwart personal attacks. He acknowledged to the Philippians that some were preaching the gospel “from envy and strife, . . . out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment.” But he did not tell the Philippians to shun or ignore them. Instead, he rejoiced that “in every way,

whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed” (Philippians 1:15–18). Paul was not all that concerned about the way others treated him. But he was passionately concerned about how they treated the gospel.

He wielded the weapon of his apostolic authority against opposing teachers in Galatia, not because they were opposing him personally, but because they were undermining the gospel he preached. He did not hesitate to defend and assert “the independence of his apostleship in order to defend the gospel.”⁴

The Gospel Truth

(Galatians 1:3–5)

The Galatians were clearly confused about gospel truth. Although they had responded in faith to Paul’s proclamation, they did not understand it well enough to recognize and reject another gospel, which was no gospel at all. Paul gave them a masterful refresher course: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen” (1:3–5).

Do you see what Paul has done there? What looks like a simple greeting is, in reality, a one-sentence statement of the heart of the gospel. It tells us that the gospel *consists* in grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ; that it was *accomplished* when Jesus gave Himself for our sins according to the will of our God and Father; that it *resulted* in rescuing us from this present evil age; and that its *purpose* is to glorify God forever. It is indeed a “masterful refresher course”—not because it re-preaches exhaustively what Paul had taught the

Galatians—but because it supplies four critical touchstones to help them remember what he had taught them.

Touchstone #1 is the phrase “grace and peace.” Intent as Paul was on freeing his brethren from the grip of legalism, it is no surprise that the word “grace” stands first in this sentence. Grace contradicts and opposes all aspects of legalism. Grace provides peace with God to unworthy, helpless, hate-filled sinners who cannot merit it and will not seek it (Romans 5:6, 8, 10). Grace comes from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ as a gift, freely bestowed rather than earned (6:23). Grace gives cursed men and women what God requires of them to make peace with Him when they lack the desire and ability to do so themselves (5:1). The gospel truth Paul had preached to the Galatians consisted of gracious means to the end of peace with God and stood in stark contrast to the “other gospel” of legalism.

Touchstone #2 is the reminder of how God accomplished the salvation of sinners. Jesus gave Himself for our sins according to the will of our God and Father. Jesus acted in submission to the plan of the Father to redeem a people for His own possession by satisfying God’s righteous requirements on our behalf (Philippians 2:5–8; Titus 2:14). He lived in perfect obedience to all of God’s law and gave us the credit for all of His righteousness (Philippians 3:9; Hebrews 5:8–10). He took our sin upon Himself on the cross, absorbed all of God’s holy wrath against our sin, and shifted our curse to Himself (Romans 5:9; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13). God announced His complete satisfaction with Jesus’ substitutionary work on our behalf by raising Him from the dead and exalting Him to the right hand of God where He exercises all power and authority as Lord of all (Acts 2:29–36; Romans 4:25). Once again, gospel truth clearly opposes the

teaching of legalism. Salvation is accomplished wholly by divine action. Our works contribute nothing to it.

Touchstone #3 is the word “rescue.” Gospel truth announces the good news that salvation results in sinners’ being rescued from this present evil age.⁵ We are saved to live “in this age the life of the age to come.”⁶ How does salvation do that? It replaces hard hearts of stone that are unresponsive to God with soft hearts of flesh that desire to do His will (Ezekiel 11:19–20; 36:26–27). It shifts our focus from the things of this earth to the things above (Colossians 3:1–2). It turns us away from ungodliness and worldly desires and purifies us as a people for Christ’s own possession, zealous for good deeds (Titus 2:11–14). Our rescue from this present evil age to serve God in holiness is empowered by God’s Holy Spirit living within us (1 Corinthians 15:10; Philippians 2:12–13; 4:13). It cannot be achieved through the false doctrines of legalism.

Touchstone #4 crystallizes the real issue at stake in Paul’s battle with legalism: Who gets the glory? The gospel truth, which affirms that salvation and Christian living are thoroughly gracious, glorifies God (1 Corinthians 10:31; Ephesians 1:3–14; 1 Peter 4:10–11). The false doctrines of legalism, which affirm that human effort contributes to right standing with God, glorify man.

Paul’s masterful refresher course containing four critical touchstones serves as a rebuke as well as a reminder. My guess is that Paul wrote that sentence quickly and easily without laboring unduly over its content and construction. He could do that because he understood the gospel so well. If the Galatians had understood the gospel *so well*, they might not have succumbed so easily to another gospel, which was no gospel at all. Knowing the truth is the best way to recognize error.

False teachers prey on immature, uninstructed, indifferent Christians. Gullible, credulous Christians welcomed bad doctrine into the cities of Galatia because they lacked the deep knowledge of gospel truth that would equip them to recognize and refute error. And they were not alone. Bad doctrine runs rampant today because superficiality is alive and well in our churches.

How well do you understand gospel truth? Well enough to distill it down to one masterful sentence containing enough critical touchstones to guard you from error? If not, give prayerful heed to Application exercise 3 at the end of this lesson.

How Dare You Desert the Gospel of Grace!

Galatians 1:6–9

Churches are rarely destroyed by outside attack. In fact, history has demonstrated that outside attack tends to *strengthen* Christ's church in the world. The most cunning and successful opponents of Christianity do not stand outside our assemblies and hurl insults at us. They do not oppose us in the media, pass laws against free expression of our beliefs, or burn down our buildings. Instead, they worm their way into our fellowship, gain our trust, and proceed to pervert God's gospel of grace. They are dangerous because they appear to be leading people to Christ while actually impeding the way of salvation by grace.

Paul was astounded that the Galatians had been so easily duped by such deceivers. His missionary trip through the cities of Galatia has been accurately described by many commentators as "wildly successful." Acts 13:1–14:23 indicates that the Galatians' response to his preaching had been sincere and genuine, that they had been taught well, and that they had been left with good

leadership. Paul must have been overflowing with joy when he reported to the disciples at Antioch all the things “God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (14:27). And that, no doubt, explains his indignant response to the news that the Galatians were defecting to legalism.

“I am amazed,” he wrote to them, “that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ” (Galatians 1:6–7).

The Greek word translated “deserting” is a present-tense verb that was first used in a military context to describe traitors. Later it was applied to those who converted from one religion or philosophy to another. Paul’s word usage here tells us that although he was furious at their defection, he had not given up hope. He saw them as “in the process” of accepting a different gospel and thus still open to rebuke and correction.

When Paul said the Galatians were deserting God’s gospel of grace “for a different gospel; which is really not another,” he used the Greek words *heteros* (“different”) and *allos* (“another”). Although both words could be translated with the English words “different” or “another,” they are not synonyms in Greek. *Heteros* means “another of a different class or kind,” whereas *allos* means “another of the same class or kind.”

The distinction between them is illustrated well in an event from my childhood. During a family meal at my grandparents’ home, I suddenly realized that the adults at the table were eating steak while the children had been served hamburger patties. Although my hamburger patty was quite tasty, I wanted some steak. So I ate slowly, waited until all the hamburger was gone, and then asked my father for another piece of meat. He

responded by telling me he was sorry, but there was none left. He assumed I was asking him for *allos* meat—another of the same kind. But I was, in fact, asking him for *heteros* meat—another of a different kind.

By using these two words in his rebuke of the Galatians, Paul asserted unequivocally that there is only one gospel. Forsaking the gospel of grace for a *heteros* gospel is disastrous because there is no such thing as an *allos* gospel. Replacing the gospel of grace with a gospel of works denies God's revealed truth.

Anyone who comes preaching a gospel different from the one God authorized Paul to preach is perverting God's revealed truth and must not be tolerated. "Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!" (1:8), Paul exclaimed. "As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!" The word translated "accursed," *anathema*, means "set apart and devote to destruction." This is the gravest of responses to the gravest of sins.

We can infer from Paul's statement that the gospel is a fixed body of truth that cannot be changed, and that its authority rests in its source, not its messenger. He goes so far as to submit himself, his fellow apostles, and even the angels in heaven to the gospel's authority. John MacArthur describes him as vehemently reaching "for the most fanciful possibilities imaginable to make his point that absolutely no messenger, no matter how seemingly godly and good, should be believed or followed if his teaching does not square with God-revealed apostolic doctrine. The truth outranks anyone's credentials, and every teacher or preacher must be evaluated on the basis of what he says, not who he is."⁷

The New Testament speaks of only two general categories of people whom God devotes to destruction: those who do not love the Lord (1 Corinthians 16:22), and false teachers (Galatians 1:8–9; 1 Timothy 1:18–20). Those who do not love the Lord and those who pervert gospel truth desecrate the glory of God and impugn His sovereign majesty. But they will not get away with it. They will reap what they sow—utter destruction in separation from God.

Notes

1. It is interesting to note that by the time Paul wrote 1 Timothy, his confidence in himself had further disintegrated. In 1 Timothy 1:15, he refers to himself not as the least of the apostles, but as the chief of sinners. Apparently Paul did *not* “feel better about himself” the longer he was a Christian. Instead, he seems to have grown more keenly aware of his own inability to serve God “in the flesh,” and he appears to have developed an increasing sense of his complete dependence on grace the longer he served Him.
2. I am aware that Paul usually dictated his letters to a scribe (*amanuensis*). However, Galatians 6:11 leads me to think he *might* have written this entire letter (not just the conclusion) in his own hand. That would certainly fit with the tone and urgency of the letter.
3. “Apostle” was the term used by Jesus to designate men who had been personally chosen, called, commissioned, and authorized to teach in His name. The term was not used to refer to believers in general, as was the term “disciple,” but was a specialized term applied to a unique group who had

no successors (John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, The Bible Speaks Today [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1968], 13). Although the word “apostle” can be used in a general sense to refer to “sent ones,” Paul uses it here in Galatians to refer to those men appointed by Christ to speak revealed truth from God.

4. Philip Graham Ryken, *Galatians*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2005), 6.
5. My thanks to Brendon O’Dowd for pointing out that the Greek word translated “rescue” here is not a mild one. It carries the idea of “ripping out,” or “a violent takeover.” Rescuing sinners from this present evil age was no pleasant stroll in the park for God. It was truly a bloody deliverance from a vicious enemy.
6. Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, 18.
7. John MacArthur Jr., *Galatians*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), 16.

E X E R C I S E S

REVIEW

1. Read Acts 9:1–31; 22:1–21; 26:9–23; and Philippians 3:1–14. Describe the changes in Paul that resulted from his salvation. How does Paul account for these changes?
2. What distinguishes Christ-appointed apostles from other people? What were Paul’s reasons for emphasizing his standing as a Christ-appointed apostle to the Galatians? Do you think it was necessary for him to do this? Explain your answer.

3. List and briefly explain each of the four critical touchstones contained in Galatians 1:3–5 that help us recall the essential elements of the gospel.
4. How is Paul’s “masterful refresher course” in Galatians 1:3–5 a rebuke as well as a reminder?
5. Should we fear false teaching more than persecution? Explain your answer.
6. Read Acts 13:1–14:23. How does this passage help you understand Paul’s attitude toward the Galatians in 1:6–9?
7. Distinguish between the Greek words *heteros* and *allos*. Then explain the significance of Paul’s usage of those two words in Galatians 1:6–7.
8. Discuss the significance of Paul’s curse in Galatians 1:8–9.

APPLICATION

1. This week begin memorizing one or more of the following Scripture passages:
 - 1 Corinthians 15:10 (If you are up to the challenge, memorize vv. 1–10.)
 - 2 Corinthians 3:5–6
 - Titus 2:11–14
2. This week in your prayer time, use 1 Corinthians 15:1–10 and Philippians 2:5–16 to help you thank God for the grace of salvation and for the grace that equips you to glorify and enjoy Him in all circumstances of life.
3. How well do you understand the gospel? Answer the following questions after considering the accompanying Scripture passages. When, where, and with whom did the gospel origi-

nate (Ephesians 3:11; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 1:1–2; Hebrews 13:20)? What prevents human beings from relating rightly to God (Isaiah 6:1–5; 59:2; Romans 3:9–20)? How does the gospel establish a right relationship between God and human beings (Romans 3:21–28; 5:9; 8:3–4; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Ephesians 1:3–14; Hebrews 5:9–10)? How is the gospel communicated (Romans 10:14–15; 2 Timothy 3:14–15)? How is the gospel received (John 6:37, 44, 65; Philippians 3:9; Ephesians 2:8–9)? What does the gospel accomplish (Romans 5:1–2; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 2:10; Titus 2:11–14; 3:4–7; 1 Peter 1:3–5, 9)? What is the ultimate purpose of the gospel (Isaiah 43:7, 20–21; Matthew 5:16; Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14; 1 Peter 2:9)?

Using your answers to the above questions, distill the gospel into one sentence containing the gospel’s essential elements. How might memorizing this sentence protect you from falling under the influence of false teachers?

DIGGING DEEPER

1. Timothy George, in his commentary on Galatians, supposes that first-century Judaizers may have presented their spurious doctrine in letters or sermons similar to the following:

“Dear brothers of Galatia, we greet you in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ! We have heard how through the ministry of Brother Paul you have been converted from the worship of dumb idols to serve the true and living God of Israel. We are glad you have made such a good beginning, but we are afraid that there are some very important things about the Gospel Paul has omitted to tell you. We ourselves come from the church at Jerusalem which is directed by

the apostles Jesus called and ordained. Paul though is an upstart. Why, he never even knew Jesus while he was on earth and was certainly never commissioned by him as an apostle. True, Paul did visit Jerusalem just after he stopped persecuting us, and there he learned the ABCs of the Christian faith from the true apostles. But the message he now preaches bears no resemblance to theirs. I don't imagine he even told you about circumcision! Why, this is the very way God made it possible for you Gentiles to become a part of the New Israel. Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Circumcision is just as important as baptism—nay, more important, for it will introduce you to a higher plane of Christian living. If you will observe this holy ordinance of the law, God will be pleased with you. We are just now forming a new association of law-observant churches, and we would love for Galatia to be represented! We are the true Christians. Jesus, our great example, pleased the Father by fulfilling the law and so can you!" (Timothy George, *An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Galatians*, The New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994], 95–96).

Research what the Bible teaches about Paul's claim to be an apostle and about the gracious nature of salvation. Then write a response to the above supposed communication. Support your points with specific scriptural references. Do not hesitate to seek input from your pastor, elders, other church leaders, or wise Christian acquaintances.

2. Writing almost forty years ago, John R. W. Stott said, "We live in an age in which it is considered very narrow-minded and intolerant to have any clear and strong opinions of one's own, let alone to disagree sharply with anybody else" (Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, 26). Do you think his words are

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more or less relevant to our own day than they were to the day in which they were written? Explain your answer using personal or cultural illustrations. Then explain the impact you think this characteristic of our age has had on Christians—particularly in regard to their understanding and proclamation of the gospel of grace.

Primary Passage

GALATIANS 1:10–2:10

Supplementary Passages

ISAIAH 49:1–6

JEREMIAH 1:4–10

ACTS 8:1–3; 9:1–31; 11:27–30; 15:1–35; 16:1–3; 22:6–
21; 26:12–18

ROMANS 2:1–11

1 CORINTHIANS 7:17–20; 9:1, 19–23; 15:3–11

2 CORINTHIANS 4:1–6; 11:30–33

EPHESIANS 1:11

PHILIPPIANS 3:1–11

2 PETER 1:20–21

Before reading the lesson material, please read the primary Scripture passage listed above and as many of the supplementary passages as time allows. Then briefly summarize in your notebook what you have read. (Do not go into detail. Limit your summary to a brief description of the people, events, and/or ideas discussed in the passages.)