

A Study of Galatians

Paul's Impassioned Letter to the Churches in Galatia

This study takes a look at the fiery words Paul had for those “perverters” (1:7) of the gospel who were infiltrating the churches in Galatia (modern day Turkey). Paul’s impassionate response to these “agitators” (5:12) comes from his deep love and concern for the Gentile Christians in these churches which he and Barnabas had planted (see Acts 13 & 14). Paul’s primary concern, which was so strong it even led him to oppose the Apostle Peter, was that some were teaching salvation came through something other than the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. They insisted that Christians first be circumcised (in other words, first become Jews) before they could be called followers of Jesus. Additionally, they taught that righteousness was gained by continuing to observe various laws. Paul’s response is summarized in 2:21, where he says, “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” The whole point of the gospel (good news) is that God’s grace is unmerited gift and in no way dependent upon obedience.

It is difficult for us to accept the gospel’s message because it is incredibly counter-cultural. No other economy works the way the economy of grace works. “You get what you pay for” is the adage that characterizes the marketplace. Wouldn’t you find it difficult to believe the car salesperson if s/he said to you, “you know what, don’t worry about paying for this one; it’s on the house this time”? What?! That’s crazy! And the Apostle Paul shows us just how crazy the grace of God is.

This study attempts to draw out the rich themes of grace, freedom and promise that Paul so ardently argues for in Galatians. This study is not for the proud (or is it in fact perfect for the proud?) because it requires we relinquish our insatiable desire to earn our way. How many of us would insist on paying for the car because it just “wouldn’t be right” to take it for free? It requires a great deal of humility to digest Paul’s letter to the Galatians for only when we admit we actually CANNOT pay for the treasure we receive in the gospel (this is humbling, is it not?) are we able to receive it. So as you engage God’s Word of grace and truth, I pray you “may have power, together with all the Lord’s people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (Gal 3:18-19).

- Peter Little

Galatians 1 – 2:10

Study #1 in Paul's letter to the Galatian churches

Introduction to Galatians

1. Imagine you had invested several months of your time, endless emotional and mental energy, and your most fervent passions into getting a shelter for the homeless up and running. Once you established it, put leadership in place and set it on track as it was nearly bursting at the seams with growth, you left to start another shelter in another city. But word got to you about your original shelter. Some new folks had showed up and began telling your staff they were doing things wrong. They were told they must change the way they do things. The meal times had to be changed, the shelter rules had to be modified, the staff structure had to be tweaked and much more in order for the shelter to operate “properly.” Knowing that these new people had it wrong and that their changes would destroy the shelter if they were implemented, how would you respond internally and externally?
 - Galatia – present day Turkey in the middle of the peninsula
 - Church in Galatia – founded by Paul and Barnabas in their first missionary journey (Acts 13 & 14)
 - The Galatian church's foundation was shaky from the get go. Read Acts 13:13 – 14:28.
2. What was Paul's emphasis in his address at the synagogue in the city of Pisidian Antioch in the province of Galatia? (Acts 13:8-39)
3. In Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, what was the response of the Jews? The Gentiles?
 - The Galatian church was infiltrated by Judaizers, Jewish Christians who demanded that one must submit oneself to the Jewish law in order to receive salvation. This struck at the heart of the gospel message Paul originally proclaimed to them, which insists that salvation is gained by grace through faith in Christ alone (Gal 2:16). One of the laws being required of Christians was circumcision. This emphasis endangered the church of becoming legalistic and slaves to the law. Paul was furious about this and as soon as he received word of it, he fired off this emotional letter to the Galatians emphasizing our freedom. He probably dictated the letter and somebody else wrote it down. If we could hear him, he was probably yelling at the top of his lungs! Paul was furious!

Read Galatians 1:1-5

4. Describe Paul's understanding of himself and his purpose based on these opening verses of his letter.
5. The word apostle means “one who is sent.” Who sent Paul and who did not send Paul? Why is this important for the Galatian church to know?

Read Galatians 1:6-17

6. Paul is suggesting in v. 6 that the Galatians are deserting Jesus Christ by following these false teachings. In what ways is this desertion of Jesus?
7. Why do you think Paul adds v. 10?
8. What does Paul claim as reasons for his legitimate preaching the gospel?

Read Galatians 1:18-2:10

9. Why did Paul go to Jerusalem? (this is the gathering described in Acts 15)

10. Why do you think Paul writes of his acceptance by the Apostles?

So What?

11. What are the qualifications of being a Christian? How have you added to or subtracted from the qualifications?

12. Paul was addressing a perversion of the true gospel (“good news!”) that was taking place in Galatia. How is the gospel being perverted today? How are you addressing those perversions?

Galatians 1:11-2:10

Study #2 in Paul's letter to the Galatian churches

1. What are you a fanatic about?
2. What does the word "gospel" literally mean?
3. What is the origin of Paul's message of good news?
4. What have others suggested about its origins that Paul is seeking to refute?
5. What makes the gospel the measure of every other message? What are some examples of erroneous messages people receive at home, at school, in the workplace, in relationships, at church that the gospel challenges?
6. Who was calling his message into question?
7. What were the Galatians doing in response to this conflict between Paul and the Judaizers?
8. How do you respond to the magnitude of Paul's claims?
9. What had Paul been fanatical about before his conversion (see Acts 8:3; 26:5,10; Galatians 1:13, 14; Philippians 3)
10. What were you a fanatic about before you met Jesus, that is, before Jesus got a hold of your life?
11. How does the subject of the sentences change from verses 13-14 and verse 15-16?
12. What point is Paul trying to make in this change of subject?
John Stott: "Next, his pre-natal choice led to his historical call. God *called me through his grace*, that is, His utterly undeserved love. Paul was fighting against God, against Christ, against men. He neither deserved mercy, nor asked for it. Yet mercy found him, and grace called him."
13. What was the private revelation that Paul received? (Compare 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8, 9; 2 Corinthians 4:6)
14. For what public purpose did Paul receive that revelation?
15. What happened after Paul's conversion?
16. What are his alibis?
17. What are some of the benefits of quiet and solitude based on personal experience?
18. How long after his conversion did Paul go to Jerusalem? How long was he there and what did he do there (see also Acts 9:26, 28-29)?
19. What is significant about Paul's traveling companions, one a Jew and the other an uncircumcised Greek? Why did Paul bring Titus? What's he up to? (Note the theme of the Judaizers in Acts 15:1)
20. What did Paul hope to accomplish from his consultation with the apostles in Jerusalem?

21. Why is he telling us this? What implications does any of this have for our lives today?

From John Stott:

"This combination of softness and strength is well expressed by Martin Luther: 'Let this be then the conclusion of all together, that we will suffer our goods to be taken away, our name, our life, and all that we have; but the gospel, our faith, Jesus Christ, we will never suffer to be wrested from us. And cursed be that humility which here abaseth and submitteth itself. Nay rather, let every Christian man here be proud and spare not, except he will deny Christ.

*'Wherefore, God assisting me, my forehead shall be more hard than all men's foreheads. Here I take upon me this title, according to the proverb: *cedo nulli*, I give place to none. Yea, I am glad even with all my heart, in this point to seem rebellious*

and obstinate. And here I confess that I am and ever will be stout and stern, and will not one inch give place to any creature. Charity giveth place, for it "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things" (1 Cor.13:7), but

faith giveth no place...

'Now, as concerning faith we ought to be invincible, and more hard, if it might be, than the adamant stone; but as touching charity, we ought to be soft, and more flexible than the reed or leaf that is shaken with the wind, and ready to yield to everything.'"

Galatians 2:11-21

Study #3 in Paul's letter to the Galatian churches

Breaking the Ice:

Recount a bit of a memorable and substantial conflict you've had with someone you care about.

Studying the Text - Peter's actions:

1. Based on our previous study of Galatians, what do you know about Paul's background and his passion for the Christian church? (see Acts 9:1-31, Gal 1:1-2:10)
2. Read Acts 10:9-48 (explain what happens b/t 29 & 44). What was God trying to teach Peter in his vision? How did Peter respond? What does Peter now know with regard to Gentile believers?
3. Read Gal 2:11-14. What did Peter do that was so wrong?
4. What motivated him to do it? Gal 2:15-16 reminds us that both Paul and Peter held to these very same beliefs.
5. Peter was publicly confronted and humiliated because he was not living his life according to the gospel. What is the result when you live a life that veers from the good news?

Paul's response:

6. What was Paul's response?
7. Read Gal 2:15-21. Why was Paul so upset? Why do you think Paul confronted Peter in public and not privately? (see Gal 1:8-9 & 2:5)
8. What could have been the long term impact to the Christian church had Paul not stood up for what he knew to be right in this circumstance?
9. Based on what we know could have happened, what can you say was the impact of Paul's decision to be adamant about this one issue?
10. Why is it important for you to stand up for what you know to be right?

Galatians 2:15-21

Study #4 in Paul's letter to the Galatian churches

1. Define the word justification (used in verses 16 and 17 and its noun form in verse 21).
2. If justification is the exact opposite of condemnation what would it mean to be justified?
3. If God is righteous and we are not righteous how do those two statements capture the human predicament?
4. Compare Job 25:4, where Bildad the Shuhite asks, "How can a person be made righteous before God?"
5. What approaches to solving Bildad's dilemma does Paul contrast in verse 15 -16?
6. If you were arguing the Judaizers' position how would you summarize in your own words what they were preaching and teaching?
7. How is their approach in fact the recognized "religion" of most people in the world?
8. What is the attraction of this approach?
9. What does Paul mean when he teaches the Galatians that believing in Jesus Christ is the only hope we have? What does this word "believe" mean and look like?
10. What is the implication for the people of the world of Paul's assertion that "by the works of the law shall no one be justified"?
11. According to Paul, how have his critics challenged his position? Compare John Stott: "Paul's critics argued like this: 'Your doctrine of justification through faith in Christ only, apart from the works of the law, is a highly dangerous doctrine. It fatally weakens a man's sense of moral responsibility. If he can be accepted through trusting in Christ, without any necessity to do good works, you are actually encouraging him to break the law, which is the vile heresy of "antinomianism".' People still argue like this today: 'If God justifies bad people, what is the point of being good? Can't we do as we like and live as we please?'"
12. How does Paul refute their challenge?
13. What does it mean that we are crucified with Christ? What are the practical implications of that reality and what does it have to do with Paul's rebuttal?
14. How do you respond to Paul's intensely personal assertion that Jesus died for ME and now lives in ME?
15. How do the assertions of the Judaizers deny the nature of God and the mission of Christ?
16. Humanity's greatest need is justification. Justification is not by works of the law but through faith in Christ. To not trust Christ but to put my trust in my own abilities is an insult to the character of God and the mission of Jesus. How? To trust in Christ and become united to Christ is to accept an altogether new life. How is that so?

Galatians 3:1-26

Study #5 in Paul's letter to the Galatian churches

Breaking the Ice:

Recount a time in your life when you acted foolishly.

Studying the Text:

Read Gal 3:1-5

1. What was Paul so angry about? According to Paul's words, what are the Galatians doing that's so wrong?
2. Define foolish. Why does Paul choose this word here?
3. Based on v 1-5, what gift did the Galatians think they got by obeying the law? How does Paul argue they receive that gift?

Read Gal 3:6-14

4. Abraham was credited with righteousness by believing. What does it mean to be righteous? Gen 15:6 → God promises Abraham he will have descendants as numerous as the stars.
5. According to Paul in vv. 10-11, what is the consequence of relying on the law?

Read Gal 3:15-18

6. Retell the example Paul gives in vv 15-18. What is Paul's point here?
7. What is the inheritance Paul refers to in v 18?

Read Gal 3:19-26

8. What does Paul say is the purpose of the law?
9. If someone entirely unfamiliar with the Christian faith were to ask you to explain how 3:26-28 makes a difference in your life, what would you say?

Galatians 3:15 – 4:31

Study #6 in Paul's letter to the Galatian churches

Break the Ice:

How did you get to school when you were in grade 5 or 6? What was your favorite subject and what did you like about it?

Questions for Discussion:

1. What's Paul's main point in verses 15 -18 and who would care about an argument like that?
2. Paul says that attempts to obey the Law could not bring the Holy Spirit into a person's life, could not justify a person before God, did not take anything away from the fact that our relationship with God has always been about faith and trust. The Law brings a curse. So what was the purpose of the Law according to Paul in verse 19 and in what ways was it inferior to the gospel? (it was a restraint to sin, one of its main functions was temporary, it was given by a mediator, two mediators in fact: and angel of the Lord and Moses).
3. In verse 21, Paul asserts that the Law was not given to give life. What does he mean?
4. What role did the Law play in preparing the way for the gospel (see verse 22: the Law declared the entire world a prisoner of sin. All of us are trapped. When people recognize this they are then prepared to receive the promise of salvation that comes by trusting Jesus)?
5. The word translated "disciplinarian" in verse 24 is the Greek word paidogogos: **παιδαγωγός** [pahee·dag·o·gos/] Three occurrences; AV translates as "schoolmaster" twice, and "instructor" once. 1. a tutor i.e. a guardian and guide of boys. Among the Greeks and the Romans the name was applied to trustworthy slaves who were charged with the duty of supervising the life and morals of boys belonging to the better class. The boys were not allowed so much as to step out of the house without them before arriving at the age of manhood.

The schoolmaster was both the one who instructed the child in the Roman home and the one who took the child to school (both the school teacher and the school bus). In summary, what does the law teach us and where does it take us?

6. Review: Where do the promises God made to Abraham reside? Where are you if you put your trust in Jesus according to Paul in verses 25-27?
7. The way the Greek word for "offspring" is used in verse 26 means adult offspring (literally sons). Contrast this status with the picture you had in mind when we talked about the paidogogos and his charges?
8. What else has happened as a result of faith in Christ? (In Greek society when a child reached adulthood they were given a special garment that signified to everyone that they now had the full rights of the family and the society. They were adults.)
9. In verses 4:1-7, issues of inclusive language have corrupted the translation in the NRSV. Preferring the inclusive "child" to the masculine adult term "son" the NRSV has made this text more difficult to understand than it needs to be. How do you respond to what Paul says in these 7 verses?

10. Paul brings into view the issue of freedom and slavery. What is it about the things he mentions that are enslaving (both from their Greek religious and cultural background and the Jewish festivals introduced by the Judaizers, days – Sabbaths, months – new moons, seasons – Passover, etc., years – sabbatical and jubilee)?
11. Restate Paul's appeal in verses 8-20. What has happened to the relationship between the Galatians and Paul? What role have the Judaizers played in the breakdown of the relationship between Paul and the Galatians?
12. Summarize Paul's closing argument in verses 21-31.
13. Summarize the gospel.
14. How is the gospel the foundation for every call to live our lives to please God?

Galatians 5

Study #7 in Paul's letter to the Galatian churches

Breaking the Ice...

1. What is your opinion about how some people since the 1960s have taken their freedom of speech to the extreme?

Studying the Text...

2. Read Gal 5:1-12. Here again, Paul is enraged about the false teaching going on in the Galatian church. He is vehemently against the teachings that the Judaizers have infiltrated the church with. This section in some ways is the climax of Paul's argument against the circumcision group. John Stott writes:

Ours is an age of tolerance. Men love to have the best of both worlds and hate to be forced to choose. It is commonly said that it does not matter what people believe so long as they are sincere, and that it is unwise to clarify issues too plainly or to focus them too sharply.

*But the religion of the New Testament is vastly different from this mental outlook. Christianity will not allow us to sit on the fence or live in a haze; it urges us to be definite and decisive, and in particular to choose between Christ and circumcision. 'Circumcision' stands for a religion of *human* achievement, of what man can do by his own good works; 'Christ' stands for a religion of *divine* achievement, of what God has done through the finished work of Christ. 'Circumcision' means law, works and bondage; 'Christ' means grace, faith and freedom. Every man must choose. The one impossibility is what the Galatians were attempting, namely to add circumcision to Christ and have both. No. 'Circumcision' and 'Christ' are mutually exclusive.*

Further, this choice has to be made by both the people and the ministers of the church, by those who practice and those who propagate religion. It is either Christ or circumcision that the people 'receive' (verse 2), and either Christ or circumcision that ministers 'preach' (verse 11). In principle there is no third alternative.

And behind our choice lurks our motive, It is when we are bent on flattering ourselves and others that we choose circumcision. Before the cross we have to humble ourselves.

3. What is freedom?
4. Read Gal 5:13-25. What is the nature of the Christian freedom Paul is talking about here? What does it include and what does it exclude? Consider John Stott's words:

*What Christ has done in liberating us, according to Paul's emphasis here, is not so much to set our *will* free from the bondage of sin as to set our *conscience* free from the guilt of sin. The Christian freedom he describes is freedom of conscience, freedom from the tyranny of the law, the dreadful struggle to keep the law, with a view to winning the favour of God. It is the freedom of acceptance with God and of access to God through Christ.*

- a. Christian freedom is freedom from sin, not freedom to sin.
 - b. Christian freedom is a form of slavery, not to sin but to our neighbor.
 - c. Christian freedom is the freedom to approach God with boldness.
5. Would you agree that Paul is comparing liberty and license? And if so, what is the difference Paul is making between the two?
 6. Would you agree that Paul is comparing the law and love? What is Paul asserting as the relationship between the law and love?
 7. In v. 13a, Paul says we ought not use our freedom as an opportunity to indulge the flesh. What does he mean by that?

8. In v. 13b and 15, Paul says we ought not use our freedom as an opportunity to exploit our neighbor. How can a false understanding of our freedom lead us to exploit our neighbor? How might some who have taken their freedom of speech to an extreme be exploiting their neighbor?
9. In v. 14, Paul says we ought not use our freedom as an opportunity to disregard the law. What does he mean by that?
10. Paul talks a lot about “the flesh”. What is he referring to when he uses this language?
11. What do you know about the nature of crucifixion? In verse 24, Paul says, “Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” Expanding on Paul’s illustration of our “crucifying the flesh”, what is Paul saying those who belong to Christ have done with the flesh? Consider John Stott’s words:

So widely is this biblical teaching neglected, that it needs to be further enforced. The first great secret of holiness lies in the degree and the decisiveness of our repentance. If besetting sins persistently plague us, it is either because we have never truly repented, or because, having repented, we have not maintained our repentance. It is as if, having nailed our old nature to the cross, we keep wistfully returning to the scene of its execution. We begin to fondle it, to caress it, to long for its release, even to try to take it down again from the cross. We need to learn to leave it there. When some jealous, or proud, or malicious, or impure thought invades our mind we must kick it out at once. It is fatal to begin to examine it and consider whether we are going to give in to it or not. We have declared war on it; we are not going to resume negotiations. We have settled the issue for good; we are not going to re-open it. We have crucified the flesh; we are never going to draw the nails.

What Difference Does it Make...

12. What in this text challenges you most?
13. How have you used your freedom in the past at another’s expense or exploitation?
14. How have you used your freedom in the past as a license to indulge the flesh?
15. How have you used your freedom in the past to disregard the law?
16. How can you live out the freedom of the gospel?
17. Is the fruit of the Spirit something that’s ripening in your life? Why or why not?
18. How might you address evidence of the deeds of the flesh in your life?

Galatians 6

Study # 8 in Paul's letter to the Galatian churches

Warming up...

1. Tell a story of when you confronted your parents, perhaps for the first time. Why did you confront them? What gave you the courage to do that? How did you do it? What were the results?

Studying the Text...

Read Galatians 6:1-5

2. How does Paul say we ought to respond if we see someone sinning? What might that specifically look like?
3. How might restoring another from sin expose you to temptation?
4. Verse 2 says, "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." What is the law of Christ? How is bearing one another's burdens fulfilling it? How might bearing another's burden influence the manner in which you restore someone "detected in transgression"?

Read Galatians 6:6

5. Unpack Paul's statement in verse 6. Read 1 Cor. 9:1-14. What is Paul's stance on paying vocational ministers? What is his argument for this position?

Read Galatians 6:7-10

6. What does Paul mean by "If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh"?
7. Conversely, what does Paul mean by "But if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit"?
8. What is inferred by Paul's statement in verse 9, "So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up"?
9. Why does Paul emphasize the importance to work for the good of the family of faith?

Read Galatians 6:11-18

10. Explain verse 15. What is the "new creation" Paul is talking about?
11. Speaking of the "rule" Paul refers to in verse 16, John Stott says:
*The Greek word for 'rule' is *kanon*, which means a measuring rod or rule, 'the carpenter's or surveyor's line by which a direction is taken'. So the church has a 'rule' by which to direct itself.*
What "rule" is Paul referring to?
12. For more on the "marks of Jesus branded on [Paul's] body", see 2 Cor. 11:24-29. What kinds of emotions are buried in Paul's statement in verse 17?

What Difference Does it Make...

13. What in this text challenges you most?
14. Consider whom God has given you the opportunity and burden to restore as in 6:1. Pray for the courage to be obedient to God's voice, even to an impalpable task such as this.
15. What kinds of opportunities have arisen for you to support your teachers? Have you seized them? What barriers exist for you? Pray about how you can support those who teach you.

16. How have you used your freedom in the past to disregard the law?
17. Think of a specific time recently when you have “sown to your own flesh.” Ask for forgiveness and freedom from such sowing.
18. In what ways have you recently “sown to the Spirit?” Praise God for the courage and obedience He has given you.
19. How can you be an encouragement to your brothers and sisters in Christ this week? Make plans to follow through on one of your ideas.