

The Danger of Legalism

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[0:00] Okay, well, good morning, everyone. It's lovely to see you. My name is Graeme. I'm the pastor here at the church and we're going to turn to God's word now. So why don't you turn, if you have a Bible, to the book of Galatians. We're in at chapter five today. If you don't have a Bible, then there's ones on the pews. You can even grab your own this morning at the back.

We've got a ton of them just to give away every Sunday. We want to get God's word into as many people's hands as possible. So you can grab one of them on your way out this morning, or you can even scroll on your phone. We'll let you away with that one.

But whatever you need to do to get the Bible, God's word open in front of you, make sure that you do it. And Galatians chapter five is where we are today. But why don't we just pray before we get into this passage together.

Father, truly you are the holy God, the matchless one, the incomparable one, the eternal one.

And Lord, like we sang at the start, who are we? Who are we to come into your presence? Father, thank you that the initiative, as we'll see this morning, is all yours.

[1:10] The invitation that you make us through Christ to come and know forgiveness, have life, and to call on you and know you as Father. And so Lord, we pray that as we turn to Galatians chapter five today, that the words of Psalm 19 verse 10 would be true.

They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold. They are sweeter than honey, than honey from your honeycomb. Lord, may we know the sweetness of your word today, we pray.

In Jesus' name we ask. Amen. Amen. Well, folks, here's what we need to do with this text, if we're to really get it, is we need to kind of enter its atmosphere.

Here's what I mean by that. If we're to understand this, the clue is all in its tone. All in its tone. You know, when our little girl Grace was little, one of the things that she used to do, we used to love to do as a family, was to go to the little transparent bridge that is just underneath the castle that kind of goes over the train lines at Waverly.

The transparent bridge was one of her favorite things to do because she loved to look at the trains coming and going and get a wave from the train driver. It was her favorite thing to do. I remember one Saturday we went, though, and there was a gate put in front of this little, the entrance to this transparent bridge.

[2:44] And the sign on the gate just said, Warning, danger, falling rocks. Danger, danger, falling rocks.

And despite the protestations, Dad, can we not just claim it? As a parent, you know that you've got to be the grown-up in the room and you realize that that sign is telling you something that you need to wake up and see, that this is not a suggestion, this is not a top tip, the brevity tells you everything, that this is a warning.

Venture here, venture beyond this, you're in some serious danger. Friends, this is a warning text. See what he writes at verse 2.

Mark my words. You ever said that? You ever written that? Mark my words suggests, anytime I've ever used that phrase, that what I'm about to say, I really, really mean it.

Here is Paul the pastor deeply concerned about the souls of the Galatian people. And we've got to work out and ask ourselves, what is the thing that he's so concerned about?

[4:12] So why don't we read this together? It's Galatians chapter 3. Sorry, Galatians chapter 5. See if you can spot his tone. See if you can spot the thing that he's warning them about.

It is for freedom, says Paul, that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

Mark my words. I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.

Again, I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised, that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ.

You've fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope.

[5:25] For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

You're running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you.

A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough. I'm confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty.

Brothers and sisters, if I'm still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case, the offense of the cross has been abolished.

As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves. Friends, if nothing else, hold on for that bit.

[6:30] Now, what is up for grabs in Galatia and what's up for takes this morning is the words that you get in verse one, the word that we thought about last week, and it's this word, freedom.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm. That's the imperative there. Stand firm. And blink, and you might miss the two little details at verse one.

Notice the image. One that he's taken from everyday agricultural life. The yoke being the wooden beam that you put around the neck of two animals that binds them together.

Paul says, uses the image, yoked to slavery. Striking, isn't it? Notice the image, but notice the word.

Again, blink, and you might miss this. What is the word? Again. You see it? Again. Now, do you know what that tells us?

[7:29] And this is one of the big themes we'll carry through this sermon this morning. It tells us that there's more than one way that you can be a slave. More than one way that you and I can be a slave.

Now, the Galatians, remember, we thought about this last week, these guys, the majority, I imagine, would have grown up in a Gentile background, knew nothing of the gods of the Old Testament, as it were.

Their former way of life was chasing and spending themselves worshiping idols. Paul's called those idols back at chapter four, weak and miserable forces.

These things that they were chasing, they were giving themselves to pursuing, thinking that at some point, if I keep on giving myself to this, it's going to be like the pinata of my dreams, that at some point, I'm going to whack it and all the goodies are going to come and fall on my head.

And that's what they thought. But in the end, all of those things that they were giving themselves to were just black holes of emptiness that were always leaving them wanting more, never satisfying, never fulfilling.

[8 : 39] And that's what an idol is. We can look at this and think, well, just miniature shrines, perhaps that's one side of it. The other side is just something in our lives that we worship because we think it's going to give us the ultimate lasting thing.

Something that we give ourselves to because we've been duped into thinking that if only we can get our hands on that, if only we manage to find and get for ourselves that, then we will be complete.

And the Bible says the reality is that even though we think we are sipping on martinis, in actual fact, friends, we're guzzling salt water.

You know that famous line by John D. Rockefeller, do you remember this line that he gave, richest American at the time? How much money does it take to make a man happy? Just one more dollar.

Man who literally had everything and yet do those sound to you like the words of a free man. When we make a good thing, friends, when we make a good thing into a God thing, it is a recipe for disaster.

[9 : 56] And Paul's saying that God in Christ, and this is all of our stories, isn't it? He has saved us out of that hollow way of life.

Friends, I dread to think what my life would be if Jesus hadn't got involved. The things that I would be pursuing, thinking that life is all about these things. He has saved us out of that hollow way of life, out of slavery, and he's saved us to walk in freedom as we know him.

To know Christ. But here's the thing that Paul perceives that maybe the Galatians, maybe we don't even perceive it in our own lives. They are in grave danger of just swapping one form of slavery for another.

And Paul calls out the issue for the first time in this letter. He's going to dance around it a little bit named it. But here he names it. What is the thing? It is circumcision.

That's the presenting issue. Acts 15 gives us the mantra of these false teachers. Rocking up in Galatia, this is what they're peddling.

[11 : 14] Unless you are circumcised, this is what they're saying, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved. Do you see how ultimate that is? And Paul says, if you adopt that as your life thesis, Galatians, you are declaring that what Jesus did for us on the cross wasn't wholly sufficient.

And allow that mindset to slither in the door of your life. Verse 2. See what he says. Not only will Christ be of no value to you, but verse 3, you'll find yourselves in a place where you'll need to obey the whole law.

And he summarizes it in verse 4. And I always think this is just like the films when you see somebody just pull the pin between the two train carriages and they just begin to drift, they become untethered.

Paul says, you adopt this and you'll be detached, alienated from Christ and everything that he's won for you, everything that's yours because of him, it will no longer be yours.

Now at this point you may be thinking one of two things. Number one, why is Paul getting so worked up over a minor male surgical operation? Surely there's bigger fish to fry.

[12:39] Surely there's bigger things to go after. Number two thing you might be thinking, honestly, I just don't care. A trivial first century theological debate.

I gave up a Sunday morning for this. I gave up a 10 o'clock off, 10 o'clock tea off time for this. I gave up watching Laura Kusenberg on Sunday morning television for this.

Are you kidding me? Friends, here's why this is so much more relevant than we might think it is at first glance. In a sense, the issue isn't circumcision.

In a sense. The issue is why these Galatians feel the need to be circumcised in the first place. Christians and Christian or non-Christian, it doesn't matter who you are here this morning, you might be tempted to think this is how it works when it comes to how we relate to and live with the God of the universe.

And the umbrella term for what Paul is talking about here is legalism. It is a mindset that at its core thinks that we can somehow win God's love, earn God's favor by our performance.

[14:07] And Paul says, you swallow that, friends, it is deadly. And it's not the gospel. And I just want us to see from this passage how legalism does three things to us.

And we've got to ask ourselves, friends, do we see any of these things in our lives? And there's three of these things.

The first one's a lot longer than the other two, just so you can hang on in there. But let's ask ourselves, do we see any of these three things in our lives? Here's the first thing legalism does. It steals our assurance.

Steals our assurance. Have a look at verse five. Come with me. Paul's telling us there that as he lives his life in the present, he does so with one eye on his future.

That's what he's saying. Live my life in the present with one eye on the future. And it is his confidence about the future, just work it the other way around, his confidence about the future that gives purpose and meaning and rest in his presence.

[15:14] So friends, if you seek to earn your way to God, here's the problem that you'll soon encounter, is that you have no idea whether what you are doing and how often you are doing it is going to be good enough in the end for God.

You've got no idea. How do you know? How do you know? And this is one of the most unique features of the Christian faith. There's a guy that cuts my hair just up the road from me, cuts my hair every time I go in there.

Always have a really good chat. He's from Iran. Always have a really good chat about life and about kids. He's about to have his first child. Always have a chat about things. But every time I go in, I always go in at nine o'clock after the school run, go in and he cuts my hair and he just puts on the television the YouTube playlist of the Islamic call to prayer.

So I'm listening to this. It's always dangerous. You pick your conversation when someone is at your hair with scissors. But I just ask him this time round, I said, listen mate, can you just translate for me what's being said?

And he listens to it for a minute and here's what he says. The person is singing and praying that God would be merciful. And then he did this.

[16:35] Merciful, merciful, merciful. And here's the thing. We want to ask our Muslim friends is how do you know? How do you know?

Friends, we've come in here this morning, we've sang about how Jesus has done everything. He's done everything. How do you know?

Friends, assurance is the birthright of every child of God. And it changes everything about how you live the Christian life.

life. Why is Paul so confident in contrast to my barber friend? Why is he so eagerly expectant about the future? Because the righteous verdict that Christ has won for him and shares with him and he knows by faith now will be visibly declared over him by God the Father when Christ returns.

The righteous verdict that we have now that we are justified because of what Jesus has done for us and that alone is the sure proof of the fact that it will be declared over us in the end when Christ returns.

[17:48] What a day to have God declare over us not because of a single thing that we've done. You are righteous. You are justified. So we can look confidently towards that day knowing that the verdict is coming.

It changes everything about your Christian walk in life. I was listening to a great interview recently with a man called John Lennox. Three things about John Lennox.

Number one, he's the emeritus, professor of mathematics at Oxford University. He's a Christian and he's now 81. So this interview was all about how he is looking forward to the future.

What's he thinking about? How does he finish this race well? And here's what he said and I thought this was fascinating. He said that he looks at so many of his peers and his friends who are the same age as him and about how they're not trusting in Jesus and how it's beginning to dawn on them that all the accolades that they have, all the letters after their names, all the material possessions that they have, all the status and comfort that they enjoy is going to one day disappear.

And how in their mindset it is going from years to months to weeks to days and their whole life is shrinking in front of their eyes.

[19:11] And he said in contrast it feels like my life is the opposite. It feels like because I'm looking at Jesus, I'm getting to know him every day. As my mental faculties fade, as everything else goes on in my life, my world is opening up because I know what's ahead.

I eagerly await it, that righteousness that God will declare on me in the end. My life feels like it's opening up. And do you know what? That's exactly what assurance does to us.

We can look ahead confidently knowing that assurance is the rocket fuel of hope. Friends, don't let legalism steal your assurance.

Here's the second thing it does. It dilutes our love. Have a look at verse six, where Paul essentially says, if I can spin Shakespeare, to circumcise or not to circumcise, that is not the question.

He's saying whatever route you go down, neither have the ability to change a life because neither have the power to truly transform a human heart. That's what he's saying.

[20:21] It's not the issue. But his gospel, Jesus alone, it does because the Holy Spirit impacts us in the deepest places and in the most profoundest of ways.

And how do you recognize a transformed life? How can you tell? It's that faith expresses itself in love.

And we're going to think a bit more about that next week. Christ has saved us from something but for something. This is how we're called to live now, by loving each other. But what does a legalistic mindset do when it comes to how we relate to other people?

Think about it. It's about us earning. It's about us doing. We're no longer interested in serving people. Actually, we're interested in beating people.

They've not done what? They're associating with who? They're struggling with that? I'm better than that.

[21:33] And we begin to subtly promote ourselves to the position of judge and jury or the flip might happen. We look at people and it becomes a competition. I'm not as good as them.

I need to live up to so-and-so. I need to live for the approval of them. I need to get in with that group. And you see what it does? Legalism slowly begins to dilute our love and neither of those things are us living in the freedom that Jesus has won for us.

Whereas when we get that Jesus has saved us by grace alone and we are secure in that we will live a life of serving others the one that God has called us to.

Faith expressing itself in love. And the third thing that it does, legalism, friends, it stifles our joy. You see what Paul says at verse 8 there?

He wants the Galatians to see that this persuasion, this argument is not from God. But notice what he calls God there.

[22 : 42] He calls God the one who called them. And that is a reference to the unmerited favor of the God who wrote our names in his book of life before the foundation of the world.

And who called us in time as he sent his son who died for our sin, who rose again, he sent his spirit, he called us in time on his terms, not ours.

And the initiative in salvation was all of God's. And Paul's concerned that the Jesus plus what we do ethic is going to work its way through their lives.

Do you see the image there again like a bit of yeast spreads through and eventually dominates the entire batch of dough. We might think it's a little thing, but you take this mindset and it begins to permeate everything.

Because legalism's default mode is tick box. if I do this, then God will somehow be happier with me than if I don't do this.

[23 : 58] Whether it's prayer, whether it's attendance, whether it's serving, whether it's even our Bible reading. Friends, they're all wonderful things, but if we think that by doing them we are somehow earning God's love or his favor like he looks on us disapprovingly if we somehow have a bad night's sleep and we miss it.

Do you see how subtly we can slip into legalism's mindset? How easy delight in the channels of grace, the way God blesses us and we receive delight for our souls can drift into duty.

You know, that's one of my favorite Bible in a year plans that I do. Many of you might do this one as well is by a Scottish pastor from years and years ago called Robert Murray McShane.

He does this Bible in a year program and it's a wonderful thing to try and read the Bible and get scripture into our systems, but here's what he perceived. You can read the quote on the screen.

Being a good pastor of people, a student of the human heart, is that he always wrote this in his preface to his much loved and used plan. Do you see it? He writes, some may find conscience dragging them through the appointed task without any relish of the heavenly food.

[25 : 23] If this be the case with any, throw aside the fetter and feed it liberty in the sweet garden of God. And here's the line, my desire is not to cast a snare upon you, but to be a helper of your joy.

Friends, we come to God's word not as a duty, but as a child desperately needing to hear the voice of the father who loves us.

And as a deep sea diver going in search of pearls, do you see the difference? Paul's telling them there's more than one way to be a slave.

More than one way to be a slave. And of course, if you think about it, it's exactly the strapline to the parable of the prodigal son. You ever thought about that?

Which really should be called the parable of the seeking father, but we'll run with it. The parable of the prodigal son. You know the story? Son number one, Luke 15, runs away, parties hard.

[26 : 41] Dad, I want your money, not you, believing that the good life is to be found away from the father. That's one form of slavery. But son number two, in that parable, where is son number two the whole time?

He's at home. But son number one returns. He's shown incredible grace and it comes out of son number two, the words, I've been slaving for you this whole time.

In other words, I deserve your love, I deserve your favor because I've worked for it. And in the sting of the parable is that both sons miss the father.

father. It's just another form of slavery. What's the solution then? We're going to think more about this in the weeks to come. The solution is not to just try really hard, the opposite of which is just try not really hard.

Neither of those things miss it. To be completely secure in the fact that Jesus has done it all for us, to be completely secure in who he is and his love for us.

[27 : 55] That's what transforms it. Paul says you were running well, take no other view. It's not too late for you to say no to legalism and get back to reveling in who Jesus is and your unity to him.

And let God remind us in his word today as we see Paul writing here at verse 11, that the cross will always be an offense to the world.

Why? Because it took the real death of the real Son of God on a real Roman cross to deal with my real sin.

The cross declares to us that we need a saviour, no matter how good you think you are, no matter what you try and do with your positive mindset, the cross declares in history that you and I cannot deal with our sin on our own.

And if we try and do so without of Jesus, the wrath of God remains on us. The cross says no matter what you're doing, no matter how religious you feel, you need a saviour.

[29 : 18] and to some that will be the smell of death. There will have anything to do with that, but to others do you see how the fact the cross is the very place where we find forgiveness in life, if only we will humble ourselves.

So let's not be surprised. I always find it in my conversations with people, you can talk about God, everyone's happy with that, but you start talking about Jesus and things get a little bit more frosty.

And this text tells you why. You need a saviour. You need a saviour. And I think that's what is going on, if you were hanging in there for this, with the emasculate language there, just in case you're wondering.

Right at the end there. Now Paul's playing on the circumcision language clearly. You're thinking, has the guy lost the plot? Is he just having an outburst of anger, frustration? What's going on here? I think there's something deeper going on here.

In line of that chain of thought about needing a saviour. To emasculate oneself, to remove the male genitals, would in effect be to become a eunuch.

[30 : 33] And the law stated, and remember these guys are all about the law, keeping the law, the law stated that a eunuch was someone who was prohibited from entering the assembly of the Lord.

So to become a eunuch, if they were to go the whole hog, law keepers that they are, it would become obvious to them, physically obvious to them, and to everyone who was looking on, that they were not inside, but they were outside the presence of God.

And they would see that they need a saviour. So let me just try and land this, friends, just as we close.

You know, just a few years back, I remember Alex and I had a few nights away in North Queensfield, just the other side of the bridge. And for the first time in our life, we walked across the fourth road bridge.

You ever done that? Walked across the fourth road bridge a lot, lot longer than I thought it was going to be. I thought we'd be there and back in an hour. Boy, was I wrong. They've closed down that bridge to cars, haven't they?

[31 : 51] And you begin to walk over it and you understand why. Because it's only open to lorries now. And we were walking along this bridge and it was a really peaceful experience, but every so often a lorry would come past.

And it felt like the whole bridge was shaking. And we turned around thinking there was this kind of horde of buses that were coming at the back and we turned around and see this little minivan.

And all of a sudden you realise why they felt the need to build this new bridge for all the traffic. And that new bridge you'll see on the screen is joined together by three big stone towers.

And if you're like me and you're geeky, you go on the bridges website, what you will read is that to get those towers in place, they drilled, pumped concrete down underneath that bridge, getting those things in place, and it took them 15 days of drilling, of making sure the foundations were right, because they knew that when the wind comes, and boy, does it come if you cross that bridge, and the storms come, and the ice gathers, and when the waves batter it, and as the traffic rallies across it, the bridge is only going to be able to stand against what comes against it, if it's built on a solid foundation.

And this is our foundation as believers. Justification by faith alone.

[33 : 28] Jesus has done it all. Foundation. Grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, and the thing is, all sorts of things will come at us in life.

I've done this job long enough now, with some of you through the most horrific of things. Illness, bereavement, redundancy, recess, disappointment, persecution, relational breakdowns, all of these things will come at us.

We're not promised a pain-free life when we follow Jesus, but if we build our lives here, if we stand firm on this, in the end, Christ the solid rock, friends, we will be standing.

And so Paul says, verse 2, mark my words, there's the warning, but here's the imperative, stand firm then. Remember your foundation, stand firm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

let me pray. And so Father, we thank you so much today that we have your ear, we have your heart, because we come to you in the name of Jesus.

[34 : 56] And so Lord, I pray that as your word has gone forth today, Father, I pray that your spirit would be bringing challenge, would he be bringing comfort, would he be bringing a greater view of the sweetness of Jesus and the assurance that we now enjoy and have in him.

So Father, I thank you that your spirit is a much better pastor than I could ever hope to be. And so I pray that he would be applying this truth today right down into our souls, into the places where we need to hear this.

Thank you, Lord, that your word is a solid foundation foundation. Thank you that you tell us things that we just wouldn't believe are true if it weren't the case, that you have spoken them over our lives.

And so Father, we pray that as we finish our time here today, that what we've gazed at this morning and what we'll build towards as we work towards the end of this letter would resonate in our minds and our hearts.

Thank you that in Jesus we can say confidently that we are eagerly awaiting the future. Father, thank you for your love for us. we just commit these things to you.

[36 : 08] In Jesus' wonderful name we pray. Amen. Amen.