

12. Galatians 4:8-12 The Greatest Discovery & The Greatest Mistake

Ps. John Lesnik 12/10/14

INTRODUCTION

The book of Galatians has six chapters and they are easily divided into three themes. The first two chapters are doctrinal. Paul reminded the believers the Gospel of grace is the only true Gospel. The two middle chapters are personal, and the last two chapters are practical.

We're in the middle of this personal section where the Apostle revealed he was frustrated and perplexed that these believers had turned back from the grace way to pursue religion. He wrote this letter because some false Jewish teachers had infiltrated the churches and demanded that all the Christians had to become good Jews before they could truly be saved. That meant, "No more pork for you!" That meant no work could be performed on Saturday. That meant the men had to be circumcised, whatever their age. And these baby Christians were being misled to go back to old religious rules and rituals. Paul was so upset that he wrote this harsh letter trying to knock some sense into their legalistic-leaning minds.

Galatians 4:8-11. "Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you."

Legalism is a real temptation for us because we're wired to DO something. We have learned all of our lives that we earn our bread by the sweat of our brow and we can't help but apply that to our spiritual life. And it's easy to get into a mindset that if we do a certain bunch of things, then we'll be right with God. For example, if we think that our Christian lives require checklists such as, tithing, church attendance, singing praise songs, taking Communion, being baptised, witnessing, Bible reading, involvement with church programs, service, and prayer... and we must attend to these things in order to maintain our salvation and God's favour.... Then we are on the wrong track. In fact, we would be in the same boat as these Galatians believers Paul is writing to. You see, the grace of God has nothing to do with your goodness, it's all about the goodness and grace of God who has chosen to save sinners. In this passage we uncover three great truths.

1. A PERSON'S GREATEST DISCOVERY: God wants to know me

Paul wrote, *"Now that you know God—or rather are known by God."* The word "now" indicates that these people had not always known God. There were two kinds of Christians in Galatia. Some had come from a Jewish religion, and the Gentiles had come out of a Greek religious background. Greek and Roman religion had an entire selection of gods and goddesses. Zeus, Neptune, Mercury, Aphrodite, and Bacchus were just a few of these many gods. Statues and icons of these deities could be found in the temples throughout the Roman Empire. These mythological gods lived in their own world and seldom interacted with inferior human beings.

And legend always had it that when they did intervene in human affairs, the results were usually not in the humans' favour. So people feared these capricious gods and constantly sacrificed to them to keep them happy. They didn't want a relationship with these gods; in fact, they hoped their offerings and sacrifices would make the gods ignore them. But Paul wrote that these gods were NOT gods at all: They were just dead, deaf, blind, and dumb, statues. The idea that God would know you intimately and that you could know Him was totally unheard of.

After Paul preached the gospel to these people, they made the greatest discovery that a person can ever make. It is this: *the One True God, the Living God, created YOU for a purpose. He made you so that you could have a personal relationship with Him. He wants to know you!*

This message was totally revolutionary compared to the Greek and Roman religions. We toss around the term “eternal life” a lot, but we think it means, “living forever.” It includes that, but eternal life isn’t about a length of your life; it’s about a relationship. Jesus defined eternal life in His prayer the night before He was crucified. He prayed, **“Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” (John 17:3)** Do you know Jesus? I’m not asking if you know about Jesus. I’m asking if you know Him. You can know all the facts about the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus without ever truly knowing Him.

Illustration: In Mississippi, there’s was a man who claimed to be the world’s greatest Elvis fan. Paul McCloud attended 120 Elvis concerts, and has collected hundreds of scrapbooks that contain over a million references to Elvis. He owns 55,000 records and CDs of Elvis. He named his only son Elvis. He renamed his home ‘Graceland Too’, and opened it to the public (for a price) as a shrine to Elvis. It’s the #1 Elvis tourist attraction for Japanese tourists in Holly Springs, Mississippi. In fact, his wife one day had enough and said, “It’s either Elvis or me. Who you gonna choose?” He chose Elvis and that ended the marriage. Paul McCloud is obsessed with Elvis and knows every detail about his life. But if you ask him if he ever met Elvis, he’ll say that the greatest regret of his life is that he never met Elvis. Paul McCloud is an Elvis expert, but He doesn’t know Elvis.

He reminds me of some people who are Jesus-experts, but they don’t know Jesus. They may own a lot of Bibles, books and pictures about Jesus; and they may have the walls of their home decorated with crosses. But that’s not the same as knowing Jesus. In Matthew 7 Jesus talked about judgment day when many people will say, **“Lord I know you! Lord, Lord in your name I did many wonderful religious acts.”** But Jesus will say, **“Depart from me. I never KNEW you.” (Matthew 7:23)** A lot of people claim to know “the good Lord” or the “Man upstairs.” He has a name. His name is Jesus. Do you know Him? Does He know you? I’m not boasting, but I know Jesus, and I know that I know Jesus. You may be thinking, “How do you know that you know Jesus?” I want you to know why I know that I know Jesus... well, I talk with Him and He talks with me. In fact, I spoke with him first thing this morning. Do you have that sense of Jesus being real to you right now? Not a historical character, but a real friend? That’s the greatest discovery you’ll ever make—that God wants to know you personally.

2. A CHRISTIAN’S GREATEST MISTAKE: Going back to religious rules and rituals

“How is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles?” He mentioned that they had gone back to observing a special day (Sabbath), special months, seasons and years. This referred to the Jewish festivals of Yom Kippur, Passover, Tabernacles, and Rosh Hashanah (Feast of Trumpets), and the year of Jubilee. Those were all important to the Jews, but Paul called them “weak and beggarly elements” that enslave Christians. The NIV translates it as “miserable principles”. They’re miserable principles because you’ll be miserable trying to keep them all. Because when it comes down to it you can’t perfectly obey all the rules and observe all the rituals.

What does it mean today? There are a few groups calling themselves Christians who have reverted to observing the Jewish laws and days and festivals. Seventh Day Adventists worship on Saturday and refrain from eating food that is forbidden in the Old Testament. Other groups still observe the Jewish festivals like Passover, Tabernacles and Yom Kippur.

In certain areas, there are campuses where those who observe the Jewish festivals hold the Feast of Tabernacles. They have hundreds of little 3 x 3 metals buildings where families would live in for the eight day Feast. Some families also do this in their backyard. Sure, it’s probably a lot of fun and is kind of like camping outside with the entire family where songs would be sung, prayers would be made, Scripture would be read, and a palm branch would be waved. This was originally instituted in Leviticus 23. There are those that still participate in this today.... But the question is are we required to follow those Jewish customs and rules?

Here’s what the Bible says: **“Having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross...Therefore do not let anyone judge you**

by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” (Colossians 2:14, 16-17)

All the rules and regulations of the Old Testament are only shadows of the real thing and Jesus is the real thing. Think of it like this: If Jesus walked up to you to shake your hand would you ignore Him and try to shake hands with His shadow? That’s legalism.

Now you are probably pretty comfortable with me talking about the Jewish festivals and the Seventh Adventists, because chances are none of you are into either of those groups. But let’s get personal for a minute. Even Christians can fall into the trap of having special days and holidays and seasons. If I asked you, ‘what day is the Sabbath for Christians?’ What would be your answer? If you said, “Sunday” you aren’t wrong, but you aren’t completely right. If you said, “Saturday,” you aren’t wrong, but you aren’t completely right. Here’s the answer: For a Christian EVERY DAY is the Sabbath. We are resting in the finished work of Christ seven days a week. We don’t recognize a special day. If you do, then you may be leaning toward legalism.

There’s a line from an old Amy Grant song about a grown-up spiritual baby. She sings, “*His spiritual tummy can’t take too much; one day a week he gets his spiritual lunch. On Sunday he puts on his spiritual best; and gives his language a spiritual rest.*” I worship seven days a week, don’t you? We gather on the first day of the week like the earliest Christians did because that was the day of the resurrection, but Sunday never became the Christian Sabbath.

What about “holidays?” I know I’m going to ruffle some feathers here. Why do you think it is that some people flock to church on Easter or Christmas Day, but then they are pretty much AWOL the other 50 weeks of the year? I heard one pastor call them Chreasters—Christmas and Easter Christians.

Maybe they consider themselves a Christian, but not a very good one; so to make up for it they’ll make sure they show up for the special times. But frankly, we don’t have any Sunday that’s more special than another. We celebrate the resurrection every Lord’s Day. They hope by showing up on a “Special Day” that they’ll gain a little better standing with God. Besides it makes them feel better about themselves and makes their mother happy. Remember, legalism is the belief that you can improve your standing before God through religious performance. “Wait a minute, pastor! Are you telling me that I shouldn’t attend church on Easter?” Nope, I’m saying come on Easter, and the Sunday after, and the Sunday after that! We don’t have any special Sundays. In fact, every day is significant!

You probably won’t like what I have to say, but I love you enough to challenge you to examine your faith to see if there is any legalism creeping in. While I don’t have any problem with special days like Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, or Good Friday, when you participate in those special holiday services, make sure you aren’t doing it to make yourself feel better in terms of your godliness. Some believers celebrate the forty days of lent that lead up to Easter.... and sure it can prepare your heart to celebrate the resurrection – but if you have even a teeny smidgen of legalism there, then it can turn into a religious reason to lose weight, or a chance to let others know how spiritual you are by what you’re giving up. *Jesus said that when you fast, don’t let anyone know you’re fasting.*

Illustration: *It’s interesting just how much things can change from real Biblical practices to the practices of today. When Moses fasted, it was for 40 days without food before receiving the 10 Commandments. When Elijah fasted, for 40 days he went without food. When Daniel fasted, he limited the foods that he ate whilst he prayed. When Jesus fasted, it was for 40 days without food in preparation for His ministry. When Paul fasted, it was for 3 days without food after encountering Jesus. These days, rather than fasting anymore from food, people say they are giving up FaceBook for a few days, or will go without coffee or chocolate for a few days, or will give up a second helping at the dinner table!!!*

True... I think a lot of us would benefit from giving up some indulgences in our lives, but the bottom line is this: If you choose to participate in any of these “Christian holidays” make sure your motives are pure. Are you doing this to feel better about yourself or hoping to earn a few more brownie points with God? Or are you going into it with the pure motive of simply wanting to enter into a closer and deeper relationship with your Saviour? Just remember that no religious observance, whether it’s baptism, Communion, fasting, or Lent will improve your standing before God. Why? That’s easy; you can’t improve on grace. You are already a blood-bought child of God saved by grace and grace alone. So, the greatest mistake you can make is to come to a personal knowledge of the Lord through grace... and then turn to a system where you feel you need to work for your salvation and God’s favour!

3. A PASTOR’S GREATEST FEAR: Wasted efforts

Paul expressed his personal concern when he wrote, *“I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.”* When you read the book of Acts you discover that Paul had invested a great deal of blood, sweat, and tears in starting these churches; literal blood; literal sweat; and literal tears. When he heard that these churches were sliding back into legalism he feared that all his efforts had been wasted. He feared that one day he would stand before God and would discover that his labour had been wasted.

Every pastor that serves within a church can relate to Paul’s frustration here. Every pastor knows that one day they will stand before God and will have to give an account of how they pastored their flock. And many pastors feel that sense of fear that much of what they’ve done will be burned up as wood, hay, and stubble at the Judgment seat of Christ.

You see, because Paul had “birthed” these congregations he felt as if he was their spiritual parent and they were his spiritual children. But instead of calling himself their spiritual father, Paul writes that, like a mother, he had given birth to the churches. And the pain he went through in “birthing” them was now returning. Moms, you know it’s painful to give birth—but even when those kids grow up they can still cause you pain by their poor choices. That’s the exact image Paul used a few verses later. *“My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!” (Galatians 4:19-20)*

Like a frustrated parent of a teenager, Paul is scratching his head saying, *“I have no clue why you are acting the way you do. What happened to that sweet little kid that used to live here?”* Paul said he was in the pains of childbirth until Christ was formed in them. That’s our desire for you—that Christ will be formed in you. My desire for this church isn’t that we’ll have a lot of people present, it isn’t that you’ll give a lot of money, it isn’t to build a bigger building, it isn’t to feed a lot of hungry people, it isn’t to have a massive worldwide ministry. **My desire for each of you is that on every day and in every way you are becoming more and more like Jesus Christ.** And it’s not you trying to imitate Jesus; it’s the personality and passion and character traits of Jesus being formed in your life. I can only imagine Paul’s frustration and heartbreak as he heard the reports of these believers sliding back into legalism. He had preached the gospel of God’s grace, and they started growing toward maturity in Christ. But now they had stopped short of the goal and had turned back to rules and rituals.

Illustration: I suppose since mankind first looked at a mountain something inside him made him want to climb it. Mt. Everest is the tallest mountain on the planet soaring to almost 9km in height. In 1924 a British expedition team set out to scale it. They nearly reached the summit when the Sherpa porters refused to go any further. They got within 270m of the top, and then had to turn back. It wasn’t until 1953 that Sir Edmund Hillary finally reached the peak. Sixty years later, thousands of people have made it to the top. This spring there will be another traffic jam of climbers. Today you can even download a National Geographic App and watch the progress of one of the teams!

Can you imagine the frustration of the first climbers who got close to the summit and then had to turn back? That’s what Paul is writing about. There is a way of grace that will lead you to the summit of having Christ formed in you. Don’t turn back until you reach the summit!

CONCLUSION

In his book, 'What's So Amazing About Grace?' Philip Yancey wrote: "By instinct, I feel I must do something for God in order to be accepted." The idea that God could love us free of charge, and without us having to do things to earn His love, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Buddhist has an eight-fold path to Nirvana; the Hindu doctrine of karma; the Jews have their covenant; and the Muslims have a code of law—each of these offers a way to EARN approval. Ask people what they must do to get to heaven, and most reply, 'Be good.' But Christianity is different!!

Illustration: Let's say you're a reporter and you ask a Muslim if he's going to heaven, and he'll say "Yes". You ask him "Why", and he'll say, "Because I've obeyed the Koran, because I've made the pilgrimages, I've feed the poor, I gave alms, I did this, I did that, I'm a righteous man, I'm going to heaven!" You talk to an Orthodox Jew, "Are you going to go to heaven?" "Yes, I am." "Why?" "Because I love the Law, because I keep the way of the Law, I love the Law of God, I study the Law of God, I am a righteous man." You talk to a Christian, a real Christian, "Sir, are you on your way to heaven?" "Yes, I am." "Well, why? Give me the reason for the hope that is within you?" "Ok, I was born in sin. In sin my mother conceived me. I have broken every law that God has ever given. All my works, even my best works are nothing but filthy rags..." And there the interview stops and the man says, "Sir, you've got me confused. You say you're going to heaven like the rest but you portray yourself as the most vile and most undeserving of all men. How is it that you're going to heaven?" "I'm going to heaven on the merit and the virtue of another – my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. May to Him be the glory throughout all ages and ages to come!"

Folks, never forget that your salvation is based entirely upon the work of the Saviour, Jesus Christ. If you have any involvement at all in this matter, it would be this... to throw yourself humbly at the feet of God and ask Him to save your soul. God has never rejected a genuine heart-felt cry for His mercy. And then when you receive God's grace, don't ever turn back to a religious system, but instead embrace God's grace and walk in it. We used to sing a simple praise song that said, "I have decided to follow Jesus (3 times)." The final part of each verse said it all: "No turning back; no turning back."