

The question I throw out for us to think about today is this: What rules do you think are necessary if you want to be a follower of Jesus Christ? This question is central in what we will be reading from Galatians.

Over the next couple of weeks we are going to be reading through most of the New Testament letter called Galatians. Galatians is a letter written by a very angry Middle Eastern man. A man named Paul.

Usually when we read a letter from Paul we start by reading Paul's loving comments to his audience. He introduces himself and then he thanks his hearers for the faithful way that they have lived out the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul usually tells his listeners how important they are to him and how much he cares about them.

But in Paul's letter to the Galatians, we do not get words of thanksgiving from Paul to the people that he is writing to in Galatia. We get very angry words from Paul.

So what is going on? Paul is writing this letter to Christians who participate in several churches in a region called Galatia. These are churches that Paul started in one of his missionary journeys through the region. The people that attend these churches are Gentiles or non-Jewish people. They were probably pagan before they became Christians.

But Paul has learned that some Jewish Christian missionaries have come into the region and these missionaries have been telling these Galatian Christians that an angel of God has spoken to them. These missionaries have been telling the Gentile Galatian Christians that the angel has told them that the Galatian Christians have to become Jewish first and then they can become Christian.

In other words, the men in Galatia have to go through circumcision and everyone must accept the Old Testament Jewish laws. But Paul has some very harsh words against these Jewish Christian missionaries. Paul has some very harsh words to say to the people in Galatia because they are believing what these missionaries have to say.

## **Read Galatians 1**

So why is Paul so upset? It's not like the Galatians are beating up little children or something. Paul is upset because he believes very strongly that grace is much more important than following a set of rules and regulations and he wants to make sure that the Galatians know this. Paul wants to make sure that the Galatians know fully that salvation comes through the grace of God through Jesus Christ and not by a set of rules that they have to abide by.

And Paul's belief that Gentile Christians did not have to follow the Jewish rules becomes very controversial. Let's skip forward into the second chapter of Galatians and read about the conflict boiling over between Paul and Peter who is called Cephas in the version I will be reading.

Peter and Paul (not to be confused with Peter, Paul, and Mary) are pillars in the early church movement. Let's read about what happens between the two of them around this issue and how vocal Paul is.

## **Read Galatians 2:11-14**

I wonder how many people here today have struggled with being taught and raised within a form of Christianity which was a set of rules that you had to abide by and live by. I wonder how many of us here felt that our religious upbringing has tried to rob us of our freedom.

I wonder how many of us here today have felt trapped by a Christian religion which tried to force us to abide by certain rules and regulations. If you have been exposed to a very legalistic Christian religion then Paul in his letter to the Galatians may have some good news for you today.

Paul looks at his own life as proof that following rules and regulations is not what being a Christ follower is all about. Paul reminds them about what his life was like in Judaism. Which, by the way, this is the only place in all of the Scriptures where the word Judaism is used.

Paul tells them that before he became a Christ follower that he was a persecutor of the church and Christians. Paul says he was very zealous in following the laws of his faith. He studied the laws and he kept the laws.

But then Paul says that the grace of God through Christ was revealed to him. Paul actually says that he was called from birth to be an apostle to the Gentiles but it was not until the risen Christ was revealed to him through grace did he begin to accept this.

But did you notice in the Scriptures what Paul says he did after Christ was revealed to him? Paul says he went away for 3 years. Paul did not immediately run back to Jerusalem. Paul took a 3 year sabbatical from his life. We can only imagine what Paul did during this time.

Maybe Paul had to learn some new ways to look at his life. Maybe Paul had to unlearn some old ways. But for 3 years Paul went away to find himself after this encounter with God's grace.

So how about you? Are you also struggling like Paul did with having been raised in a legalistic faith? Maybe you were raised in a home where you were taught that Christianity is all about what you do and say. Maybe you were raised in a home with an image of God being the big rule keeper and if you did not do the right things then God would do bad things to you.

Maybe you were raised in a home where you went to church to learn the right rules to live by but that there was no grace in your home if you fell short of following all of the rules. Maybe you learned to be the rule follower and you have followed those rules but now you are questioning if those rules that you were taught were the right rules after all.

There are many people today who now want no part of the church because they were raised within a Christianity that taught them that the homogeneous people that attended their church were the only real Christians. Many people want no part of the church today because they were taught that people unlike them in some way were all going to hell.

But now, maybe, you have come to a point in your life where you have met “those” people and now believe that “those” people that you were taught to fear are not going to hell like you were once taught.

A functional society needs good rules. If we don't have good rules then we have chaos. No game is fun to play if there are no rules or the players cannot agree on the same set of rules. Every home and society needs rules and rules are a good thing. But if we get too focused on following the rules for the sake of rules then we miss something important.

### **Read Galatians 2:15-16**

Justification by faith means it is by belief and trust that we develop and grow in our relationship with Christ. The rules are secondary. The rules we choose to set and follow come only after accepting that God's love in Christ is always more important than the rules we choose to accept to live by.

If you have come into worship today feeling as though the rules that you were taught no longer seem to be working for you then you may be hearing some words of grace today. If you have come into worship today beating yourself up because you keep failing at following the rules then you may be hearing some words of grace today.

Being a follower of Christ is about grace. Grace is the love that God has for each of us through Jesus Christ. God's grace and God's love is there no matter what we do. God's grace and God's love is there no matter how many times we have fallen short of following the rules or wanting to change the rules.

In following Christ there is grace and love. When we accept God's grace and love through Christ then we may find the freedom we are yearning to know. AMEN.

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-Given: June 5, 2016 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)