

Jesus Plus Nothing

A Journey Through Galatians
Adapted from the sermon series by Pete Bullette

For centuries, God has used Paul's letter to the Galatians to set people free and change their lives. How is it that this short letter catalyzes such powerful life-transformation? Paul wrote Galatians in response to the teachings of a group of people that came from a strict Jewish background called the Judaizers. They claimed to be Christians and infiltrated the ranks of Gentile believers with incorrect doctrines regarding grace and salvation. In this context, the letter works like a jackhammer to relentlessly chip away all those doctrines that would distort or dilute the Gospel.

The Judaizers came with a seductive message: in order to truly please God, Gentile believers needed to conform to Jewish patterns of living. These included the observance of Kosher dietary laws, circumcision, and the Jewish religious calendar. Paul wrote clearly and pointedly to combat this false message.

The letter to the Galatians has one simple message: Salvation is by grace alone. The minute you revise the Gospel and try to add a "plus factor," you reverse the Gospel. When you add a plus factor, you nullify the grace of God and the outcome of faith becomes contingent not on grace, but on that plus factor. Paul's tone throughout the book is one of concern, dismay, and even anger at the dangerous message of un-grace that threatened the Galatian church. He knew that the centrality and sufficiency of Christ in the Gospel was at stake, and thus the entire approach to Christian life. He had good reason to be upset and concerned! He goes so far as to pronounce a curse on anyone that would add to the Gospel message of salvation by grace alone.

As Paul unpacks his message in Galatians, a couple of themes emerge around the topic of salvation by grace alone. Paul answers the questions "How do we enter the Kingdom of Heaven?" and "How do we maintain our status and live a life in the Kingdom?". He frames the answers to these questions through two opposing perspectives: Law versus Grace.

Imagine two tents built across from one another in a campsite. On one tent a sign reads in bold, capital letters: "YOU'RE ALMOST THERE." The other wears a sign that says simply, "*It is finished.*" As Christians, we will inevitably "camp out" in one tent or the other. There is no middle ground. Many of us will experience a shift from one tent to the other at various points in our life, because the "YOU'RE ALMOST THERE" tent attracts our bent human nature like a powerful electromagnet. But the hope of Galatians and the Gospel message is that believers would all live their lives in that other tent, "*It is finished.*"

In the grace tent, "*It is finished,*" your entire hope and trust is in the work of Christ on your behalf. You could never add to that work or improve upon it. Nothing is lacking. You know that you are fully accepted in Christ, and there is nothing you can or need do to get God to love you more. The Gospel tent creates people who are humble and thankful. They know that their acceptance in the Kingdom is based solely on what Christ has done. There is great joy in knowing that they are free from the need to earn God's approval, because they are accepted in Christ. Christians who live in this tent have a heart posture of resting in God's grace; they can breathe deeply, celebrate life, rest, and even play.

Not so in the Law tent. This tent is full of people who are trying to make themselves good enough for God to really like them. They hope to raise their spiritual GPA high enough to earn a

spot on God's Dean's list so they will finally be accepted and loved. They fear that they will probably bring their report card home with a C+ or B- and be rejected by their Heavenly Father. There is no rest or freedom. They are slaves to the rules and can never celebrate because they always worry about what they're missing in order to please God. There is a sense of striving to reach that elusive standard of perfection that seems barely out of reach: "YOU'RE ALMOST THERE."

In the Gospel tent, the tent of grace, salvation is by grace alone. This fact holds radical implications for every aspect of our lives. It impacts our relationships and causes us to be gracious, forgiving, and humble, because we know that we have received so much grace ourselves. In the context of Galatians, the poisonous message of the Judaizers caused those Christians who came from a Jewish background to separate themselves from those of a Gentile background. They refused to eat with them during church gatherings and possessed an attitude of superiority. Paul aggressively rebukes this behavior. As Christians, we all operate on a level playing field that is defined by the grace of God. No one is better or worse than anyone else. It doesn't matter who has a longer devotional time or who eats pork and who doesn't, or who listens to Led Zeppelin and who doesn't. All are saved by grace and live by grace alone. You will never outgrow grace or move beyond it in your relationship with God.

As Christians, we all have to fight against our magnetic but deadly attraction to the tent of Law. Why is this? Our fallen nature is full of pride. We like to think that we can earn things. We like to get a little credit. We want to prove ourselves to God. We want to be able to say, "Yeah, God saved me by grace, but now look: I've done some good things!" Many of us also have a fundamental assumption that God is against us. We imagine that maybe He begrudgingly tolerates us, but seriously doubt that He likes us. We have a hard time believing that God loves us, accepts us, and forgives us just as we are.

How do we keep ourselves from sneaking over to the "YOU'RE ALMOST THERE" tent? Galatians 2:20 reads: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." The defining reality of the Christian life is that Christ lives in you. Christ dwells in you by the Holy Spirit, which results in fellowship with God as the Spirit transforms you from the inside out to look more like Jesus. The life of Christ is doing a work in you from the inside out. The focus of your life is no longer the Law, but Christ. You abandon your Law-based checklist and cling to Christ in total dependence on Him. The love of God is the source of all your strength and hope—God who loved YOU and gave Himself for YOU.

Your confidence must only be in one place—in the person of Jesus Christ. You will never outgrow grace! You can never add to what you have in Him! You can breathe deeply because Jesus is sufficient!

Questions for Reflection

1. Which tent do you find yourself living in right now? What are signs you might be drifting towards or are already living in the tent of Law?
2. Describe life in the tent "*It is finished*" in your own words. How does grace paint a portrait of hope for your life?
3. What are items on your "checklist" that you keep in the Law tent? How does grace demolish that checklist?
4. How does life in the tent of grace affect the way you interact with others?