

## **Standing Firm**

### **Galatians 5:1-12**

Pastor Bryan Clark

Two months ago when we started this series, I reminded all of us that legalism is one of the most talked about subjects in the New Testament. The reason for that is because it is a huge problem. It is a problem for all of us—there is not one of us who doesn't struggle in some way with this proneness to go toward legalism. The problem is that it is a very difficult thing to define. It is very hard to get our arms around it.

Paul has spent four chapters, and we have spent two months, talking about the difference between grace and law and what that really means. In these chapters he has stayed fairly general; and in the teaching of this, I have tried to stay as general as he has stayed. That produces this tension, as we wrestle and process and try to understand: What is it? Is *this* legalism? Does *this* have to be legalism?

I think there are some things that you just have to struggle with. You have to process it and you have to really look at your own heart. Sometimes we want to move too quickly to the application. A lot of people have been asking, "What about this?... What about that?... We need to talk about that." But what we are trying to do is apply something before we fully understand it, and that just does not work. We really have to come to grips with what it is, and we have to understand it before we can legitimately apply it. We have spent two months trying to understand legalism. Now in chapters 5 and 6, Paul is going to get much more specific about what this looks like fleshed out in real life.

Having said all of that, I must say that I do believe this is a very grace-based church. I did not say that two months ago, because I did not want us to say, "This does not apply to us; we don't have this problem." We all have this problem. The very first week, I defined a legalist as being "somebody else." That's the way I want to define a legalist, but it is not. It is me; it is in my heart. I know it is there. We have wrestled with this for about two months but, by and large, I think we are a grace-based church.

The difference between a person of grace and a legalist is not that the person of grace does not have any legalism. We all do. The difference is when we recognize that and identify it. We confess it for what it is and we deal with it. The legalist (on the other hand), when he identifies it, he embraces it and figures out some way to defend it. That is really where the difference lies.

What is legalism and how do we define it? If I have rules, standards, and convictions, does that make me a legalist? No, those things are necessary and important. If the church has rules, standards, and convictions, is that legalism? No, that is not legalism. That is necessary to function as a body. If you disagree with me about something, or if you disagree with something we do or the way we do it, does that make you a legalist? No, absolutely not. We have to have the freedom to disagree, to talk and to discuss. Those things do not make us legalists. As a matter of fact, it is easy to use the accusation of legalism to basically live a very selfish lifestyle. If somebody comes to me and confronts me about something, I could just say, "Well, you are a legalist." I could pretty much dismiss anybody who is trying to address some area of concern in my life. If I do that, then that itself becomes a form of legalism. That is not what we are talking about at all.

The reason legalism is so hard to define is because it is not doing “this” or not doing “that.” It is an issue of the heart, and issues of the heart are much more difficult to define. I can’t tell you “this” is legalism and “this” isn’t legalism. It does not work that way. Legalism has to do with a core belief. In my heart of hearts, what do I really believe will make me holy? What do I really believe will make me righteous? What do I really believe will make me like Jesus? Do I believe it is going to be the Spirit of God on the basis of grace, or do I believe it is my own flesh on the basis of law? Is it the Spirit or is it the flesh?

When I say the word “flesh,” oftentimes we revert back to this idea of that part of me which is prone towards temptation and sin. But when Paul defines flesh in the book of Galatians, he is talking about the law. He is talking about that part of me that, through my religious performance, believes I can somehow make myself righteous. Galatians 3:3 is the best verse to identify that when he says, “You began this Christian walk on the basis of faith by the Spirit. Do you now think that you can perfect it or complete it [what we call sanctification] by the flesh?” He is talking there about legalism. He is talking about our commitment to the law. In Galatians 5 and 6, when we talk about flesh, that is what we are talking about. It is synonymous with legalism.

Sometimes I think we hold on to a little bit of legalism under the thinking, *Better safe than sorry*. But, first of all, that still maintains a very warped view of grace. And secondly, is that even true? Is a little bit of legalism safer than grace? The answer is no. As a matter of fact, not only is it not safer—it is absolutely disastrous.

Look at Galatians 5 where Paul makes this very clear. Verse 1: “It was for freedom that Christ set us free.” That seems like a rather obvious statement, but let’s think about it. Throughout the book of Galatians, Paul has told us that we have been set free. We have been redeemed—which means to be purchased out of slavery and set free. What was the purchase price? It was the very life of Jesus. Chapter 1: He gave Himself for our sins. He died for us. Chapter 3: He became the curse for us. Why did He do that? It was for freedom that Christ set us free.

Thinking through what it cost God in order to set us free, do you think it is a little thing to God that we hold on to a little bit of legalism? Do you think it is a small thing that we choose intentionally to enslave ourselves after He died to set us free? I do not think it is a little thing at all; I think it is a very big thing to God. I think it grieves His heart. He gave up His own son to die that we might be free. At one time, we were enslaved; we had no choice. But now He has died to set us free. We have the choice; and to choose to enslave ourselves again must just grieve the heart of God.

Verse 1: “Therefore, [*because it was for freedom that Christ set us free*] keep standing firm.” The Galatians had not given in, but they were thinking about it—they were headed that way. Galatians 3:3 reminds us that they came to a relationship with Christ on the basis of faith; but now they were thinking that by keeping the law, in this case by having themselves circumcised, they would become more holy. They thought they would become more righteous, more spiritual. Paul is saying, “Why, if you started on the basis of faith, do you think now you can perfect [or complete] your salvation on the basis of the flesh?” He says, “Stand firm.” That is a command—it is an imperative. He is saying, “Don’t go down that path.” I mentioned last week that one thing we can never do is to give in to legalism. It comes right out of chapter 5, verse 1. We are commanded to stand firm.

Then he says, "...and do not be subject again to the yoke of slavery." He's talking about the slavery of the law—the slavery of believing I can make myself righteous. There are two commands there: to stand firm and to not willfully choose to enslave myself again under the law.

Verse 2: "Behold [*we would say today, "Listen up"—it's a way of saying this is really important*] I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you." When he is talking about circumcision he is really using that as symbolic of law. It means whatever we would put in there: our rules or guidelines, our lists, our activities, what we do or don't go to—whatever we think we can do to make ourselves more righteous. Paul says you need to understand that if you believe that (if you believe that circumcision will make you more holy), then you have no need for Christ. He is of no benefit to you. You don't need Him; you can do it yourself.

Where Paul is going with this is to our core belief. Deep in my heart of hearts, do I believe that I can make myself more holy? Do I believe that I can make myself more righteous? Do I believe I, in my flesh, can make myself more like Jesus? If I believe that, even a little bit, then I have no need for Christ. He is of no benefit to me; I can do it myself. Does that sound to you like it is "better safe than sorry"? That sounds to me like a disaster.

A couple of weeks ago I talked about having a grace-based home and grace-based parenting. Somebody said, "Well, just wait until your kids come home and do such and such." Then what? Then am I going to pull out the law? At that crucial moment, am I going to believe that my daughter, in her own flesh, has more ability to change her heart than the Spirit of God working in her? That would be a disaster. I would never want to believe that. In that moment, more than at any other time, I need to believe that I can't change her heart. I can't make her more righteous and she cannot change her own heart. At that moment, I don't pull back and grab for the law. At that moment, I need grace all the more.

Let's use that imagery of parenting, because I think the application to the Christian life in general is obvious, but it makes it a little bit more specific. When my girls were little, we had lots of rules and restrictions with boundaries. Why? Because they were young; they were immature. They couldn't make those decisions for themselves, so we made those decisions for them. The only reason we did that was for their protection. If I believed that those standards and rules somehow make them more righteous or somehow change their heart, then I have made a big mistake. I have made a huge strategic error. As my children grow, then those restrictions and boundaries become fewer and fewer, as I begin to depend upon the life of the Spirit of Jesus within them to guide their lives, and for them to come up with their own convictions, boundaries and guidelines.

The problem is the legalist in me believes that as long as my child is obeying my rules, everything is okay. That is the deception of legalism. Everything might not be okay, because those rules have no power to change my child's heart. They have no power to make her righteous. They are merely for her protection. The focus of my parenting is to fan the flicker of the life of Christ in them into a roaring flame, so that becomes the very passion of their lives.

A lot of children just learn how to play the game. They just learn how to color inside the lines and they give their parents the impression that everything is okay. But it is not. There is a roaring lion waiting to escape as soon as they have the opportunity. Legalism can be very deceiving.

Let's imagine that my daughter Ashley, who is a senior, comes home after having been involved in some stuff that she shouldn't be involved in. What am I going to do? Because we have a grace-based home, does that mean I just say, "Good thing you have a grace-based home; otherwise, you would be in trouble." No, I would never do that. I would lay down the law. I would put restrictions in her life. I would increase her accountability. Why? Because she needs to be protected right now.

The problem is the legalist believes that I have addressed the situation and that I have solved the problem. But I have not even touched the problem. I have not done one thing to address the problem. All I have done is put up some boundaries to protect her. Now I have to go to work by trying to create an environment where the Spirit of God can do what I can't do. I have to create an environment where the Spirit of God can change her heart and make her more holy and more righteous. If that does not happen, then nothing has changed.

In those moments, do I really want to depend on her flesh and my flesh to change her heart? That is a disaster, because it won't happen. In that moment, my core belief must be that I put these things in place merely as protection. But what really has to change is what I can't change. God has to do it. Does she deserve that? No, that is grace. I believe by faith that God will do that.

We do that all the time. If I can't control what I watch on TV, I just unplug the TV. If I can't control what I am watching on the Internet, I just get rid of the Internet. If I can't control myself in these environments, I just don't go to these environments. We think we have addressed the issue. But we haven't even touched the issue. All we have done is put up some protective boundaries, because right now we are out of control. We haven't even touched the issue.

The issue is the issue of the heart; and I, in my own flesh, cannot change my own heart. No boundaries, restrictions or guidelines can make me more righteous. They cannot make me more holy. We spend too much time trying to manage our sin and not nearly enough time pursuing a passionate intimacy with God. That is where we make our strategic error if we are legalists.

The fact is that we Christians are very much like our children. We learn how to play the game. We learn how to color in the lines. We learn that we don't go here and we do go here—that this behavior is acceptable and that behavior is not acceptable. We convince ourselves that we are spiritual. But, again, that is the deception of legalism; that does not have anything to do with it. What makes us spiritual is what is going on in our heart, and only God can change our heart. Only God can make us more holy. Only God can make us more spiritual.

If I am going to depend upon my rules to change my daughter's heart, she had better be perfect—because that is the only way it is going to work. That is what Paul says in verse 3: "And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law." The only way that works is if you can keep it all perfectly; and if you can't, you need help.

Verse 4: "You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace." What does he mean by that? Does he mean they lose their salvation? Absolutely not. He has been very clear in the book of Galatians that they are believers; they are sons of Abraham. As a matter of fact, if you could lose your salvation on

the basis of your performance, it was never grace to begin with. That is not what Paul is saying. He is saying that you have fallen from grace as a principle of life. It was for freedom that you have been set free; but you have fallen from that principle and you have chosen to enslave yourself again under the law. You have concluded in your own mind that you can make yourself holy—that you can make yourself more like Jesus. Therefore, Christ is of no benefit. You have lost the whole principle of grace.

The alternative is in verse 5: “For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness.” The alternative is to believe that it is the Spirit of God that changes my heart. I believe that on the basis of faith. Therefore, I wait. I don’t work—I wait for the hope of righteousness.

Whenever the New Testament uses the word “hope,” it is always in the future and it is always a guarantee. It is not “I hope I become righteous.” It is a sure thing. I understand it is not on the basis of anything I can do in my flesh. It is, rather, something God will do through His Spirit. I believe that by faith, and that is my hope of righteousness. He will do what I cannot do to change my heart.

Paul said the same thing in Philippians: “He who has begun a good work will be faithful to complete it in Christ Jesus.” At the core of my being, do I believe that I can make myself more righteous or that it has to be the Spirit of God that will make me more righteous? Do I believe I can change my own heart? Do I, as a parent, believe that I can somehow change my daughter’s heart? Or do I understand it has to be the Spirit of God? I believe that by faith—that is my hope of righteousness.

As the culture we live in becomes more secular and goes further down that path away from God, too many Christians panic and they reach for the law, under the idea of “better safe than sorry.” That is the worst thing that you can do. When you do that, you are saying, “The worse the culture becomes, the more I need to take over... the more, in my own flesh, I have to make myself righteous... the more, in my own flesh, I have to make myself more holy. The culture is so bad that, in my own flesh, I have to change my heart.” That is a disaster.

That will never work, because the more the culture continues to decline, the more I have to become a person of grace. The more I have to believe, because of what is happening, all the more I am dependent on the Spirit of God to do what I cannot do. I need to depend on the Spirit of God to make me holy and to make me righteous. I need to depend on the Spirit of God to make me more like Jesus, or it will not happen.

Verse 6: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.” That is what makes it so hard to define legalism. Is “this” legalism? Is “that” legalism? Paul says really the “this, that and the other” are neither legalism or not. They are non-issues. What really matters is your *heart*. What makes us holy is faith working through love. Love is referred to in the New Testament as the royal law. If we love, we fulfill the whole law. In other words, the Spirit of God, through faith, is able to do for us what our flesh under the law could never do for us—to make us like Jesus. It is faith through love.

Verse 7: “You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth?” Paul uses a race as a metaphor for the Christian life. He says you were running a great race. Then somebody knocked you out of your lane. That is literally what it means. Notice that he says, hindered you from what? From obeying the truth. Let’s not tiptoe around this. Legalism is

disobedience—that is what he is saying. It is a failure to obey the truth. It is disobedience.

He commanded us in chapter 5, verse 1 to stand firm. He commanded us to not submit ourselves to the yoke of slavery. Even when we hold on to a little bit of legalism, we are disobedient. We are saying, “God I don’t believe what you said is true. I don’t believe your Spirit is going to do that, so I am going to take over. I am going to do it in my flesh.” Paul says that is just disobedience.

Verse 8: “This persuasion did not come from Him who calls you.” Legalism doesn’t come from God. You can figure out where it comes from yourself. I think it comes from our own arrogance. It is nothing but pure arrogance to believe that I, in my own flesh, can make myself holy. When I apply legalism to my children, I am saying, “I, in my own flesh, can change your heart. I have no need for Jesus; I will do it myself.” I think that is what it flows out of—our own prideful hearts.

Verse 9: “A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough.” He is talking about a little bit of yeast, which pretty soon takes over the whole lump. That is why you can’t hold on to just a little legalism. That is why “better safe than sorry” is a disaster. First, because it is not safe; and secondly, because it eventually takes over. Really, down in my core beliefs, in my heart of hearts, I have to believe one or the other. I can’t believe both. Either I can do it myself and Christ is of no benefit to me or I am totally dependent on the Spirit of God to do it. He is my hope of righteousness. I believe that by faith on the basis of grace.

Verses 10-11: “I have confidence in you in the Lord that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you will bear his judgment, whoever he is. But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished.” Paul says, “I am confident you are going to make the right choice.” His confidence is more in the Spirit of God in the Galatians than in the Galatians themselves. He says the legalists are going to get their judgment. He is talking about the Judaizers—the false teachers—and he says, “Why would you follow them? They are destined for God’s judgment.”

Apparently Paul was being accused of still preaching legalism. Paul says, “That is just not true. If that were true, why would they be attacking me for my message of grace?” The stumbling block of the cross is grace. It is the message that Jesus has done it all on the cross. There is not one thing I can add to that for my salvation. The minute I add one single religious performance to the cross, I have nullified grace. It is now law. That is the stumbling block of the cross. It is all done by Jesus, and Paul says that is what is upsetting them. He is saying, “Obviously, I am not a legalist. They are upset by the message of grace.”

Finally, verse 12: “I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves.” That is a nice way of translating this; the literal translation for the Greek word is, “Why don’t they just castrate themselves?” Paul is saying that if circumcision makes them more spiritual, then why not just finish the job and then they will really be spiritual. That is pretty strong language. It was also common in the pagan religions that the priests did castrate themselves as a way of making them more pleasing to the gods. Paul is saying that if you believe your works of the flesh can make you more righteous, then your belief system is more like the pagans, than the children of God. He says, “If that is the case, then just finish the job. Castrate yourself and live like the pagans, because that is what you are believing.” It is a very strong statement that Paul is making.

Let's face up to legalism for what it is. Legalism is a belief, an arrogant belief, that in my own flesh I can change my heart. It's a belief that in my own flesh I can make myself holy—more like Jesus. It's a belief that if I apply my legalism to my children or to the Christians around me, I can make them more holy—more like Jesus. It is disobedience; and it is a disaster.

On the other hand, grace is a belief that I can't do it myself. It's a belief that I am dependent on the very Spirit of God, on the basis of grace through faith, to do what I cannot do to change my heart—to make me righteous and holy. He is my hope of righteousness.

It was for freedom that Christ set you free; therefore, keep standing firm and do not subject yourself again to the yoke of slavery.