

## Identifying the Influence of Legalism

### Gal. 4:8-20 (Don't read yet)

As I've been studying and thinking about this passage, the word that has been coming to me all week is the word "influence". The Judaizers are influencing the Galatian believers to abandon their faith in the gospel for a legalistic message that includes faith in Christ *but adds* to that faith the necessity of their keeping the law. When Paul asks them in chapter 3:1, *who has bewitched you?* He's asking *who have you allowed to influence you to turn away from the gospel?*

It's a reminder that we need to be very careful about who and what influences us. By definition influence has a directive power to it. When someone influences us it means they change us in some way. It might be how we think, how we behave, how we speak, or choices that we make. But who or what influences us can effect the very trajectory of our lives. For good or for bad.

A good influence can help us be better people by encouraging us to grow in love, kindness, and compassion. A good influence can help us choose and strive to accomplish good and worthwhile goals. Most importantly, a good influence can help us to know God better and grow closer to Jesus Christ. A bad influence can make us worse people. It can lead us down roads that damage or even ruin our lives. Worst of all, a bad influence can lead us further and further away from God. And that's the kind of influence that the Judaizers are having on the Galatian believers and so in the verses 8-20 Paul makes a personal appeal for the Galatians to reject the Judaizers influence and embrace his apostolic influence once again.

There are many different ways that we can be influenced but this morning I want us to narrow our focus to the influence of legalism and I want us to consider that influence on two levels. On one level, we all struggle with legalism to some degree. Our hearts are hard-wired to default to legalism so it's something we all need to be on guard about. But on another level, there are modern day Judaizers out there who are actively trying to influence people to embrace their rigidly legalistic mindset and lifestyle and we need to be on guard against their influence. In these verses I think Paul gives us four identifying markers of legalism that can help us see legalism for what it is.

#### I. **Legalism influences us to get back on the highway that leads to destruction (vv. 8-11)**

Before the Galatians heard the gospel and came to Christ in faith they were living without God and enslaved to pagan gods that really weren't gods at all. But when they came to Christ they entered into a relationship with God where they knew Him and, more amazing, God knew them in a deeply relational way.

But now Paul says the influence of the legalists was turning them back to the slavery they once lived under. He asks them, *how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary*

*principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?* This can seem confusing. The legalists aren't trying to influence the Galatians back to their old, pagan ways; they were moving them to a rigidly religious lifestyle of observing the Jewish laws and holidays. So how can Paul say that they were moving toward the same slavery they came from?

The answer is that paganism and legalism are two different lanes on the same highway to destruction. They may look very different but they both lead in the same direction – away from God. Jesus said that the way to life was narrow but the road to destruction was broad. The Galatian believers were in danger of getting back on the same highway they were on before they heard the gospel – just in a different lane.

Legalism is so dangerous to our souls because it is so deceptive. Those who throw themselves into depraved and sinful lifestyles at least know, deep inside, that what they're doing is wrong. Legalism blinds us to our sin by making us proud of our spiritual maturity. Legalism has us congratulating ourselves on how close we are to God, when we are actually far from God. The Pharisees are scary examples of this – in the name of religious purity they crucified God.

Here's why this is so serious: legalism isn't a minor detour on the road to eternal life. It isn't an alternate route that eventually gets us to the same place that grace takes us. It is a U-turn that takes us in the opposite direction away from God, which is why if we see legalism in our lives—even in small doses - we need to repent (change directions) before it gets a bigger grip on us.

That's the line the Galatian believers are on. There is still time for them to repent, but Paul is concerned that his work will have been wasted on them and they will embrace legalism and by doing that, reject the gospel of grace. You can't have both. Paul makes that clear in chapter 5:

*You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. (Galatians 5:4)*

Legalism isn't an outgrowth of Christianity, it's an enemy of Christianity and its end result is to sever us from Christ. It's influence is to get us back on the highway that leads to destruction, just in the fast lane of self-righteousness.

## **II. Legalism influences us to be inflexible on non-essential issues (vs. 12)**

Paul calls the Galatians to imitate him, reminding them how, when he came to them, he "became as you are." Paul was a Jew but when he was with the Gentiles he didn't stand apart and hold his nose. He was flexible in everything he could be in order to reach them with the gospel. He ate with them, played with them, joked with them, and lived life with them, so that he could bring Christ to them. Tim Keller writes, *a ministry that's energized by the gospel is flexible and adaptable with everything apart from the gospel.*

We see that in the life of Jesus. He hung out with his disciples – walked with them and laughed

with them and patiently taught them all they needed to know about the kingdom of God. He genuinely loved them, and because he loved them he entered their lives, and then invited them to enter his life. That's what Paul is saying, *become as I am, for I also have become as you are*. I became like you, now you become like me.

*<sup>19</sup> Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. <sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. <sup>21</sup> To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. <sup>22</sup> To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. <sup>23</sup> I do all this for the sake of the gospel...1 Cor. 9:19-23*

What Paul is saying is where I can flex, I will flex in order to win another precious soul to Christ. I will meet people where they are (which takes flexibility) in order to lead them to Christ. Paul won't compromise the non-negotiables, he won't compromise on God's word or on truth. But in the non-essentials, he will bend as much as he can.

One of the marks of a legalistic mindset is that it is inflexible – they don't bend on much at all. Everything is essential to them. How you dress, what music you listen to, what Bible version you read, where you go to church, how you worship, the list of "non-negotiables" goes on and on. The end result is that the legalistic person doesn't move to become like someone else to reach them with the gospel, it presses others to become like they are.

By inflexible I don't mean that someone has strong convictions. Having strong convictions about things is good and healthy – the problem comes in when we try to force our convictions about things that aren't mandated in the Bible on other people.

If you are rigid and inflexible, you probably know who you are. Your friends and family definitely know who you are. You don't laugh much. You are critical of other believers. You don't feel free to get close to people unless they look and sound just like you. And maybe a part of you is thinking that if you loosen your adherence to the rules and regulations that are important to you it will lead to sloppy and unholy lives that don't look any different than the world. But maybe another part of you realizes that the gospel calls you to enter people's lives with love and hear their heart, their struggles, their hopes, their dreams, their hurts, and then bring the gospel into their world. And that takes being flexible. It takes grace. Grace gives the breathing room of love and acceptance in order to lead people to the Savior who entered our world and our lives in order to save us. Grace reminds us that we were so far from God, and so wretched, yet Jesus didn't hold his nose and stand far apart from us, he drew near, and loved us, and gave his life for us so that we could be forgiven and accepted into the family of God. How can we give any less to others around us?

So if you see some element of this kind of rigid inflexibility on non-biblical issues, confess it to God, repent of it and ask Him to give you His heart. And then go out and be “all things to all people that by all means you might win some.”

### **III. Legalism influences us to look at other brothers and sisters in Christ with suspicion (vv. 12-16)**

Paul was once dear to them, but something has happened to cool their affections towards him. In this autobiographical section we see that some kind of infirmity adjusted Paul's plans so that he had to detour his ministry to the region of Galatia. There has been a lot of speculation about what that illness was, but we really don't know. What we do know is that while he was there he preached the gospel and many received the gospel and Paul as from God. They were so devoted to Paul that they would have gouged their own eyes out and given them. That's devotion.

But now, because of the influence of the Judaizers, their affections have cooled towards Paul. *What has become of your blessedness (joy)?* In other words, what happened to your love for me? Verse 16 asks another question: *have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?* Where once they trusted him, they now look at him with suspicion. Where they once rejoiced in the truth of the gospel he brought to them, they now view him as an enemy for that very same truth. Why? Because the Judaizers have poisoned their view of Paul. They deliberately undermined Paul's credibility and character to the Galatians and that has affected the direction of the Galatians affections.

Legalism will circle the wagons until we begin to look at anyone who doesn't believe what we believe with suspicion. I've met Christians who are so guarded – not because they've been hurt – that's a different kind of guardedness – but because they're sizing you up. Is it ok for me to fellowship with you? Do you believe what I believe? Do you go where I go to church? Do you believe what I believe about worship, or the gifts, or the return of Christ, or... and the list goes on. C'mon! Do you really believe that guardedness is how Jesus wants us to be towards fellow believers? He said the world would know us by our love for one another, not for our suspicion towards one another.

About a year ago I was convicted that I was at least somewhat guilty of being critical of believers who weren't in my “circle” so to speak. This past week I went on a two day retreat with 18 other pastors from the area and there was a good variety of church affiliations represented there – from Presbyterians to Assembly of God to Independent churches to Wesleyans and others. But as we sat in a circle and prayed for God's heart for this region, and for people to come to Jesus in faith, and prayed with tears against child abuse and sex trafficking, and as we talked about the centrality of Jesus Christ and his death on the cross and resurrection, I realized that my circle is too small if it doesn't include all who name Jesus as Lord and Savior. It was good fellowship and I was encouraged and provoked in my walk with the Lord.

Legalism shrinks our circle of fellowship by shrinking our hearts so that rather than overflowing with grace and love, we're overflowing with guardedness and criticalness. The poison of suspicion and spiritual cliquishness can only be overcome by recognizing that the kingdom of Christ is much bigger than you or me, much bigger than our church or denomination or set of beliefs.

I'm not talking about some kind of interfaith unity, where no matter what a person believes we offer the hand of fellowship. When it comes to the gospel and to Jesus Christ, there is no fudging and no compromising. I'm talking about those who believe in Jesus and believe in God's word, and believe in all the orthodox tenets of our faith, but see things or do things differently than we do. Legalism shrinks our hearts – grace enlarges our hearts towards our brothers and sisters in Christ.

#### **IV. Legalism influences us by disguising bad motives with religious zeal (vv. 17-20)**

The ESV says, *they make much of you, but for no good purpose*. The New International Version says, *those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good*. The Judaizers came with a zealous message, they came flattering the Galatians so they could win them over, not to Christ, but to themselves. They had zeal, but its motivation was bad. The purpose of their zeal was bad. They wanted the Galatians to be wrapped up in them, not in Christ. Their purpose was to shut the Galatians out of grace so that they would puff the legalistic leaders up.

This is one of the most deceptive and dangerous characteristics of legalism that I've seen over the years. Legalistic leaders wrap up their own desire for control and authority in the mantle of religious zeal. So people are impressed with their no-nonsense intensity for God...but after a while invariably is revealed that it isn't a holy zeal, it's a self-promoting zeal. Listen, can I give you a warning? Zeal is good (and Paul says that – if the purpose of that zeal is good), but don't just gauge the intensity of the zeal, inspect the direction of the zeal. Is it coming from and rooted in grace? Is it leading to your knowing and loving Christ more, or is it leading to your following the "zealous" directives of the leader more and more? I have a burden for this because I have seen my share of people get messed up by following the wrong kind of zeal.

- Years ago a young person was describing for me this intensely holy group they had discovered. They had renounced the world and were pursuing God in a way that was intense and as this person shared I became concerned about the superior light that this group seemed to see itself in (it was doing things the way all Christians should) and this young believer – who was very sincere – was also being influenced to see the "church" as substandard in comparison. Years later this person learned that the group is very legalistic and the leader was a controlling person who abused his followers and was given to immorality.

- There is a large ministry that has held seminars since the 60's – I attended some of these

week long seminars in the 70's – that distinguished itself by teaching a very strict form of holy living. The leader taught that there should be no rock music (no drum beat) in the church or believer's life, clothing had to meet the strictest standards of modesty, and a hierarchy of authority principles needed to be lived by in order to experience God's blessing. One of the things that seemed so attractive to many was their seriousness about living in a disciplined and holy way.

I just found out that over the past 30 years there have been many scandals surrounding the leaders of this ministry. Dozens and dozens of credible eyewitnesses have given eyewitness accounts of consistent abuse of power, sexual harassment and immorality. More than once the board of directors attempted to confront the leader of this ministry only to be removed and replaced by a more agreeable board and the name of the ministry has been changed several times to distance themselves from the scandal. Worst of all, the leader – whose supposed zeal for biblical principles – was unaccountable to the authority in his life, treated young women in a way that was completely opposite to all his teaching, and demanded complete control over the lives and actions of his staff and associates. He was living by a double standard, refusing to live by the standards that he required everyone else to live by.

What does all this tell us? That no one can get it right? No, it tells us that there are some who broker a religious zeal as a means of control and self-promotion. Legalism can never, ever produce holiness in us. Only grace can do that. The zeal that legalism produces will, in the end, be a sham because it's not built on Christ. Paul's zeal isn't to make the Galatians like him, it's to see them become like Christ. And he is in the anguish of labor pains because as a true apostle he wants Christ to be formed in the Galatians. He doesn't want these churches to be stillborn, to be, in the end, spiritually dead because they were influenced by legalism away from Christ.

This has been a little bit of a heavy message as we've focused on identifying marks of legalism, but warnings are good for our souls if we pay heed to them. Let's be ready to repent of any currents of legalism that we see in our hearts. Let's be on the lookout for modern day Judaizers who want to influence us to follow an agenda of legalistic zeal.

The Lord wants to form Christ in us – to make us like Christ. He wants us to be overflowing with His grace and love and joy. As we close in prayer, let's ask the Lord to continuously anchor our hearts in grace.