

All notes on this page—Philip Ryken: *Ryken, P. G. (2005). Galatians. (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (pp. 3–4). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.*

A LETTER FOR RECOVERING PHARISEES ...

Galatians is a letter for recovering Pharisees. The Pharisees who lived during and after the time of Christ were very religious. They were regular in their worship, orthodox in their theology, and moral in their conduct. Yet something was missing. Although God was in their minds and in their actions, he was not in their hearts. Therefore, their religion was little more than hypocrisy.

The Pharisees were hypocrites because they thought that what God would do for them depended on what they did for God. So they read their Bibles, prayed, tithed, and kept the Sabbath as if their salvation depended on it. What they failed to understand is that God's grace cannot be earned; it only comes free.

There is a way out of Pharisaism. The way out is called the gospel. It is the good news that Jesus Christ has already done everything necessary for our salvation. If we trust in him, he will make us right with God by giving us the free gift of his grace. When we reject our own righteousness to receive the righteousness of Jesus Christ, we become former Pharisees.

Most former Pharisees have a problem, however. It is hard for them to leave their legalism behind. Although initially they received God's grace for free, they keep trying to put a surcharge on it. They believe that God loves them, but secretly they suspect that his love is conditional, that it depends on how they are doing

in the Christian life. They end up with a performance-based Christianity that denies the grace of God. To put this in theological terms, they want to base their justification on their sanctification.

This means that most former Pharisees—indeed, most Christians—are still in recovery. There is still something of the old legalist in us. Although we have been saved by grace, we do not always know how to live by grace. The gospel is something we received some time in the past, but not something we live and breathe. Galatians was written for people like us.

A FREEDOM LETTER ...

Paul's epistle to the Galatians has been called the Magna Carta of Christian liberty. Its theme verse is a declaration of independence—(Galatians 2:16). Whenever the church has understood this gospel message, Galatians has brought life and freedom to recovering Pharisees.

- (Galatians 2:16 ESV) Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

The free grace of God in Christ, received by faith, was the great theme of Luther's famous lectures on Galatians, which he began by saying: *"I do not seek [my own]*

active righteousness. I ought to have and perform it; but I declare that even if I did have it and perform it, I cannot trust in it or stand up before the judgment of God on the basis of it. Thus I ... embrace only ... the righteousness of Christ ... which we do not perform but receive, which we do not have but accept, when God the Father grants it to us through Jesus Christ."

Apparently, some critics were quick to point out that Paul was not one of the original twelve disciples. He was a latecomer, they claimed, who had not been commissioned directly by Christ himself. Therefore, he was only a second-rate apostle—his gospel was just hearsay.

If this is what people were saying about Paul, it is easy to see why he dispensed with the customary pleasantries and started his letter by defending his credentials. He was not merely being defensive. He understood that his opponents were making a personal attack in order to advance a theological error. They were devaluing Paul to disparage his gospel. If they could show that he was an impostor rather than an apostle, they could discredit his message of grace.

What was at stake, therefore, was not simply Paul's reputation, but our salvation. The great New Testament scholar J. B. Lightfoot (1828–1889) began his commentary on Galatians by saying, "The two threads which run through this epistle—the defense of the Apostle's own authority, and the maintenance of the doctrine of grace—are knotted together in the opening salutation." Paul was not defending himself as much as he was defending the independence of his apostleship in order to defend the gospel. When it came to the good news about salvation by grace through faith,

he refused to budge so much as a single micron.

Paul's opponents said that his gospel was not God's word to man, but a man's word about God. Skeptics make the same argument today. They accuse Paul of Tarsus of inventing Christianity. They say that Jesus of Nazareth was a teacher of love and a model of sacrifice, but then Paul came along with all his complicated Greek concepts and turned Christ into Christianity.

At the beginning of his letter to the Galatians, which was one of his earliest letters, Paul explains where his Christianity came from. It came straight from the mouth of Christ. Paul was "an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:1). His authority was not human, but divine. Therefore, Paul's message is God's own message about salvation from sin. Anyone who sets aside his apostolic teaching sets aside the gospel truth of Jesus Christ.

Many things can disturb the peace of the church, but these troublemakers were doing the most disturbing thing of all. As John Stott says, *"The church's greatest troublemakers (now as then) are not those outside who oppose, ridicule and persecute it, but those inside who try to change the gospel."* This is what the Judaizers were doing. They wanted "to distort the gospel of Christ" (Galatians 1:7). They were distorting things. They were taking sound theology and twisting it.