

## Gospel Longing

### *Galatians 4:8-20*

For the person who has been freed by Jesus from the Law and its condemnation, legalism is literally senseless and absurd. For this reason, Paul is baffled by legalism's poisonous presence in the churches in Galatia.

Listen to the words that Paul uses to describe his astonishment over a legalistic spirit leaking into a church that knows the grace of God in Jesus the Messiah.

*"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—" (Galatians 1:6 [ESV](#))*

*"O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified." (Galatians 3:1 [ESV](#))*

*"Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3 [ESV](#))*

*"But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?" (Galatians 4:9 [ESV](#))*

Legalism quickly became a problem for the early church. Just 2 or so years after Paul personally ministers in Galatia, the churches that he planted move toward this deadly error. So quickly the spiritual center of the church turns away from Jesus and to Moses!

Galatians is written to warn us against the clear and present danger of legalism in every Gospel church. **If you were to ask me for my opinion regarding what ails the modern Bible-teaching church . . . at the top of my list, I would place legalism.** If you ask me, **what most hinders Bethany** from experiencing revival, at the top of my list I would place the spirit of legalism in our hearts.

**Remember that legalism is a misuse God's good and perfect Law.** Legalism sets the Law at the center of the fellowship table. Instead of a cup of wine and a loaf of bread, we drink from the cup of commandments and eat the loaf of the Law.

Legalism makes the Law our main conversation, our focal point, our basis for fellowship, our measure for discernment, our means by which we discern the heart of God and disciple others.

**Legalism is poisonous not because it places importance upon practical obedience.** The Gospel does that even more powerfully. **Legalism is poisonous because it places the means of obedience upon our own will power rather than upon the Holy Spirit.**

Legalism is poisonous because it fixes our eyes upon Stone Tablets instead of upon the Stone that the builders rejected . . . Jesus the Messiah.

Legalism is poisonous because it places God in our control instead of God being sovereign who does whatever He pleases.

Legalism wears many faces in the church.

Sometimes it wears the Sheriff Rule face.

Other times it wears the Judge Frowny Face.

Sometimes it wears the Detective Digdirt face.

Other times it wears the Reporter Gossip face.

Sometimes it wears the Professor Pride Face.

Lots and lots of faces to Legalism. Each face looks different from the next, but at its root, legalism is a longing ...

for personal performance which supplants Christ's accomplishment,

for rules which replace relationship,

for working which unseats grace,

for criticism which ousts compassion,

for disciplined effort which neglects the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Legalism tempts the serious-minded believer because it appears to be a serious pursuit of righteousness.**

Legalism whispers, "*You have to make a choice between two options: Me OR a free fall into sin.*" But legalism lies by creating a false dichotomy. Legalism makes us think that there are only two options . . . when in fact the THIRD option is the only option that works.

Yes, licentiousness in the evangelical church is another clear and present danger for the evangelical church. But legalism is not a remedy for license. Legalism pours gas on the flame of license in the church.

**The remedy is the true Gospel that places our hearts on the cross and fixes our eyes upon Jesus. Jesus, not the Law, is our righteousness and peace and joy.**

The source of our strength is never our personal resolve to live for God. The source of our strength in connecting our hearts to Jesus through faith.

**Main Idea: A legalistic spirit is alluring and sneaky. Let us be watchful for the signs of a legalistic spirit in our souls. Christ is our life. Let us fix our eyes upon Jesus and rejoice in Him!**

### **Four Helps to Overcome a Legalistic Spirit**

Next to love, joy is the hallmark of God's Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy . . .

The lack of joy is one indication that a legalistic spirit is in our soul. Joy is never the defining response of the legalist. This does not mean that the legalist never laughs or that the legalist is never happy. But it means that the legalist is not known for his/her joy. **Joy is a temporary visitor in the legalist's life and not the defining characteristic.**

**For this reason, the pursuit of joy in Christ is one of the greatest helps we have to overcome legalism in our hearts.** What is the source of our joy? Four causes for rejoicing.

#### **1. Rejoicing in knowing God.**

*"Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods." (Galatians 4:8 [ESV](#))*

Paul is addressing the Gentile believers in Galatia. Prior to Paul's coming to them, they worshipped worthless idols. They bowed down to gods that were not gods at all, but actually demons who took control of their lives and led them into evil practices and relationships.

**Truth: People who do not know Jesus do not know God.**

There is no “interfaith” fellowship where believers share common spiritual life with those who do not believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord. For those who do not bow their knee to Jesus do not know God, but rather are enslaved to those that by nature are NOT GODS. Light and darkness cannot join together. Light joins with light and darkness joins with darkness. But light never joins with darkness.

*“But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?” (Galatians 4:9 [ESV](#))*

Paul understands why legalism is attractive to those who do not know God as their Father. Legalism is better in many ways than paganism.

But the Galatians have been adopted as sons and daughters into God’s family. They now KNOW GOD as a child knows his/her Daddy. Paul asks, *“how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?” (Galatians 4:9 [ESV](#)).*

Paul is reminding them that the Gospel of Jesus brings them into a real, loving, personal relationship with the living God. It is this relationship of KNOWING GOD that is one of our great protections against a legalistic spirit. A legalistic spirit does not reject personal relationship with God as a value, but a legalistic spirit fails to make KNOWING GOD the center of life. The legalist fails to see that their legalism is actually acid to the pursuit of knowing God Himself.

*Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.”” (Jeremiah 9:23-24 [ESV](#))*

*“And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (John 17:3 [ESV](#))*

God made us to know Him personally. This personal knowledge is the goal toward which we yearn. This is the satisfaction that will quench our thirst. This is the delight which overcomes every dark desire.

And the Gospel of Jesus opens the door to this relationship.

*“For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” (2 Corinthians 4:6 [ESV](#))*

When I was in high school, the man who served the church as the high school Sunday school superintendent showed some personal interest in my life. We never really had deep or long conversations. We did not meet outside of Sunday mornings for discipleship. But Don Pierson was one of those lay people in my church who showed that he cared for me in the way he personally greeted me and talked to me each Sunday morning.

Don did two specific things that profoundly impacted my life. **First, he told me one day out of the blue that he thought that I would make a great pastor.** It was not a long conversation, but **he did not know that the Holy Spirit had begun to press this desire upon my heart.** His words carried weight that I do not think he expected or knew. **Second, when I was a junior in high school, Don gave me a book called Knowing God by J.I. Packer.** Little did I know the impact that book would have upon me then and still to this day. It is a book that I have read many times because it brings me back to this central blessing of the Gospel.

Here are a couple of statements that Packer makes in the book that shook my heart.

*“One can know a great deal about God without much knowledge of Him.”*

*“Knowledge about God, and the capacity to think clearly and talk well on Christian themes, is not at all the same thing as knowing Him.”*

*“There’s a difference between knowing God and knowing about God. When you truly know God, you have energy to serve Him, boldness to share Him, and contentment in Him.”*

From that time forward I have asked that the Lord would keep me from a theological knowledge of Him that is disconnected from a PERSONAL knowledge of Him.

Question: Do you yearn to know God more and more? Not merely to know more about God, but to know Him as a child knows his/her dad . . . as a person knows his/her best friend?

*“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ”. (Philippians 3:8 [ESV](#))*

**Truth: Every believer knows God, but not every believer knows God to the same degree. The whole of the Christian life is summed up in the pursuit of greater knowledge of God.**

*I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him," (Ephesians 1:16-17 [ESV](#))*

We need God's gracious working through Jesus by His Spirit if we are to grow in knowing Him! The Law is a great obstacle to that growth!

*You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain." (Galatians 4:10-11 [ESV](#))*

Paul is not saying that it is wrong to observe days and months and seasons and years. We do that by coming to church on Sunday mornings. But Paul is saying that it is wrong to claim that our life with God depends upon our observing of days and months and years. When our lives focus on the externals of the Law, we lose the life of the Spirit in us.

Obedience to the Law will never lead us deeper in our knowledge of God. The Law will hinder us from our pursuit of God if we attempt to use it toward this end.

Truth: Friend, a legalistic spirit will lead you to know God less today than you did yesterday. Only the Spirit can bring life. The flesh profits nothing.

Such retreat from knowing God is a present concern from every believer. Far too many have experienced this decline.

How do I know if I am knowing God more and more?

### **Symptoms of Rejoicing in Knowing God**

- Eagerness to meet Him in the morning and to end the day with Him at night.**
- Consciousness of His personal presence through the moments of each day.**
- A longing for others to know Him with you.**

- A love for the people whom He loves.
- A conviction of sin and a repentance from it.
- A joyful song in the heart and on the lips.
- A looking to serve Him with gladness.
- A generosity to advance His Name.
- A commitment to the obedience of faith.
- A courage to honor Him in the face of opposition.
- A willingness to suffer for Him.

## Four Helps to Overcome a Legalistic Spirit

### 1. Rejoicing in knowing God.

### 2. Rejoicing in being known by God.

*“But now that you have come to know God, **or rather to be known by God**, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?” (Galatians 4:9 [ESV](#))*

I love how Paul writes here. He rejoices in knowing God. But then his mind sets upon a greater wonder. We are KNOWN by God. The LORD not only knows about us . . . but He knows us by name . . . he sets His love upon us with great interest and attention.

**Illustration:** Watching our grandchildren in the park. We care for all of the kids safety and joy. But special care to those we KNOW!

**As amazing as knowing God is, being known by God is more amazing in its treasure.** Of course, in one sense God knows every person completely. He creates each person in His image and the LORD knows every detail of every life in perfection.

Yet only those who are in Jesus through faith can say, “I am known by God.” I am forever loved by God. I am God’s special concern. I am His child and He invests His heart . . . His interest in me.

To be known by God is a great wonder.

**To be known by God is to be accepted as His child,  
to be cared for as His own sheep,  
to be protected as the apple of His eye,**

to be provided for as one forever cherished  
 to be always on the mind of God  
 to be always seen, always embraced, never alone  
 to be forever secure in His love.

Who loved first? Who knew who first?

**Illustration: Grandchildren: “I love you so so so much.” “I love you so, so, so much.” “I love you more.” “No, I love you more.”**

**Do you think that I loved you before you loved me. Or did you love me before I loved you?**

**Our knowledge of God rests upon God in grace choosing to know us.**

*“But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.” (1 Corinthians 8:3 [ESV](#))*

*“Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” (Philippians 3:12 [ESV](#))*

Rejoicing in being known by God is a vital source of protection and strength to our spiritual lives. It is right to lean in to this gift from God.

*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, **may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.**” (Ephesians 3:14-19 [ESV](#))*

### **Symptoms of Rejoicing in Being Known by God**

- A feeling of safety in the face of danger and troubles.**
- A confidence in the future unknowns.**
- A thankful heart and a singing voice in the good times.**
- A praising posture in the hard times.**
- A watching for blessings when no blessing is evident.**
- An assured expectation of a future reward.**
- An absence of fear of rejection and future punishment.**

## **-A joy in God's love.**

*"We love because he first loved us." (1 John 4:19 [ESV](#))*

## **Reason that children love the song, "Jesus Loves Me this I Know".**

**Truth: To be loved by God is the gain of all worthy things. To NOT be loved by God is the loss of all worthy things.**

### **Four Helps to Overcome a Legalistic Spirit**

- 1. Rejoicing in knowing God.**
- 2. Rejoicing in being known by God.**
- 3. Rejoicing in the ministry of God's true servants.**

Paul now moves from tough to tender. He opens the scrapbook of his memories with them and shows the Galatians some pictures from the past . . . pictures filled with life and joy and spiritual vibrancy.

*Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. (Galatians 4:12 [ESV](#))*

Paul reminds them that he had become like a Gentile in his rejection of Moses' law as a means to gain God's approval. Now he calls them to become like him in their rejection of legalism as a means to grow in their spiritual life and health.

*You did me no wrong. You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus." (Galatians 4:13-14 [ESV](#))*

Paul says, "I have no complaint at all at how you treated me when we first met. You cared for me when I was sick. Even though his sickness made him hard to look at and difficult to respect as a strong man, they received him as an angel from God! A messenger sent from heaven to help them know Jesus and receive Him as their Messiah!

Paul knew that he indeed was sent to them from God to deliver the Gospel. Paul knew that people are often swayed by visual impressions of a speaker's attractiveness and strength. So he remembers fondly that they looked past his ugly, weak condition to receive the message the God gave him to share with them.

*What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me. Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?" (Galatians 4:15-16 [ESV](#))*

Paul wants to know what changed in their heart toward him. He experienced their love and sacrifice for him while he was with them. He testifies that their love for him was so strong that "you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me."

I thank God that over the years of being a pastor at Bethany. I have often experienced this kind of love from you.

And yet, our flesh is often fickle and fragile in the love we have for one another.

*Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?" (Galatians 4:16 [ESV](#))*

The Gospel by nature offends our flesh. So if we are under the ministry of elders who has been appointed by the Holy Spirit, we can expect those elders to offend us at some point. One important part of the elders' ministry is to correct and even rebuke those under their care. It is an easy matter to receive encouragement and instruction from pastors and elders.

But what happens when we are rebuked? Is our pride stung to the point of resentment and anger? Or is our spirit receptive to what the Holy Spirit may be telling us?

**What we do at the point of offense will either create vulnerability or strength in our souls.** Our attitude toward those whom God has placed to teach us His Word will either be a great protection against false ideas OR will become a door for deep deception.

Of course, the Galatians did not think that Paul was telling them the truth. But he was. And their rejection of Paul as a person made them vulnerable to their acceptance of false teaching.

What caused the change in their relationship with Paul?

*They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you,” (Galatians 4:17-18 [ESV](#))*

The false teachers were encouraging the Galatians to close their hearts to Paul as an apostle sent from God. They had to diminish him if they are to be successful in influencing the Galatians toward legalism.

*“Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful” (Prov. 27:6).*

**Truth: A legalistic spirit thrives on unjust criticism, unfounded rumor and unreconcilable complaint.**

One of the best helps to overcome a legalistic spirit is to rejoice in the ministry of God’s true servants.

### **Symptoms of rejoicing in the ministry of God’s true servants**

- A praying heart for spiritual leaders.
- A responsive ear to biblical teaching.
- A happy attitude to disagreement.
- An encouraging voice to others in the church family.
- A loyal commitment to the relationship.
- A willing spirit to talk through complaints.

### **Four Helps to Overcome a Legalistic Spirit**

1. Rejoicing in knowing God.
2. Rejoicing in being known by God.
3. Rejoicing in the ministry of God’s true servants.
4. Rejoicing in God’s goal for your life.

*“my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!” (Galatians 4:19 [ESV](#))*

Paul has such love for those to whom God sent him. He describes the pain of childbirth as the metaphor for the pain he willingly experienced to minister the Gospel to them. Now I can confidently say that Paul did not experience the pain of childbirth, yet he knows of it. And he uses it as a word picture to describe his bond with them and his willingness to sacrifice his own comfort for their spiritual life.

“Again” - I went through this once to rescue you from idols. I am going through it again to rescue you from legalism. The goal of the pastor/elder is not simply that you come to church, serve in ministry and give to support the work. **The goal of the elders for each lamb in the flock is that Christ would be formed in you.** We KNOW that this is the eternal goal for which God sent His Son and through which you will experience unending joy.

Notice the way Paul describes his goal behind all of his labors and hardship: “Until Christ is formed in you.”

One way to take this is “Until the QUALITIES of the Messiah grow in your hearts” . . . until the love of the Messiah, the truth of the Messiah, the righteousness of the Messiah, the mercy of the Messiah, the zeal of the Messiah, the joy of the Messiah, the peace of the Messiah is formed in you.

But I think an even better way to take this is “Until the PERSON of the Messiah takes such a place in your life that your life is not yours anymore, but His.” Believer, is this your desire too? You desire for your life to be Jesus and not you? Do you desire for Jesus to be everything and you become nothing?

*“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, **but Christ who lives in me.** And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20 [ESV](#))*

Our flesh distracts us to so many desires . . . especially in church life.

We desire a certain kind of building.

We desire a certain kind of music.

We desire a certain kind of website.

We desire a certain kind of S.S. for our children.

We desire a certain kind of evangelism and missions ministry.

We desire a certain kind of church government.

We desire a certain kind of responsiveness to our needs.

We desire a certain kind of fellowship experience.

Nothing wrong with these desires UNTIL . . . UNTIL they get in the way of God's glory in His church . . . UNTIL those desires replace the ONE DESIRE for Christ to be formed in us.

One great protection against legalism is a rejoicing in God's goal for us to have Jesus formed in us. This is our focus. Everything else is secondary. Everything else is background. **Christ formed in us is the center stage . . . Christ formed in us is the eternal purpose for which we yearn.**

### **Conclusion:**

**Legalism is an unpassable barrier to our pursuit of Christ being formed in us. The misuse of the Law impedes Christ from being formed in us.**

### **How might we have Jesus formed in us?**

In Galatians, Paul does not mention the Holy Spirit until chapter 3. The first 2 chapters are outlining the problem. But beginning in chapter 3, Paul begins to turn our attention to the solution. And Paul emphasizes the need for the Holy Spirit over and over and over again. The Holy Spirit is mentioned by name, 16X in Galatians 3-6.

This past week, Kimberly and I visited our son and his family in Colorado. In anticipation of our trip, I purchased three kites for our grandchildren to fly. Two Spiderman kites and one dinosaur kite at Walmart.

The first attempt at flying kites was a disappointing failure. The day was mild, but I still had hopes of success. I asked my 6 year old grandson to assist me in getting the kite in the air by grabbing hold of the kite and running away from me with the wind as fast as he could. This sweaty effort produced very short flights of the kite some 20 feet in the air followed by a rapid descent and crash to the ground. We tried this about half a dozen times before we gave up on the venture.

The next day however was a completely different story. I did not need to ask Asher to run with the kite, but only to hold it up by his head. When I pulled on the string, the kite whooshed high into the air. Eventually, all three of my grandchildren were flying kites. The day was such a good one for kite flying that even my two-year-old granddaughter kept her kite aloft for as long as her attention would allow.

What made the difference? The difference is not what WE DID to get the kite up in the air. The difference was WHAT God did. God simply let His wind blow!

**Friends, so often our spiritual lives lack strength to ascend with joy and power and beauty.**

Why? Not because we are not running hard enough. Not because we have not followed instructions related to what we need to do. The problem is that we are trying to fly the kite of our soul without any wind.

*Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'" (John 3:7-8 [ESV](#))*