

The Discipleship Project-Summer 2021

Series 2: Standing in Liberty

A Study by John W. Moore

The Only Gospel

Series Big Idea

Because in the flesh no one can live up to the high standard of Old Testament law, we must stand in the liberty and grace of the gospel.

Lesson Big Idea

Because in the flesh no one can live up to the high standard of Old Testament law, we must make sure others are given the opportunity to obey the only gospel that saves.

FOUNDATION

Scripture Focus: Galatians 1:8 (PPT)

Just an ordinary meal with friends—at least that is how it started. But when Paul walked into the room, what began as a relaxing evening turned confrontational. Well, that isn't the whole story. Truthfully, Peter was the one who had caused a stir before Paul arrived.

The Pentecostal preacher had agreed to join his Gentile friends for dinner; then a group of Jewish believers sat down across the room. But instead of a friendly nod and a polite “hello” to his Jewish friends and then continuing with his meal, Peter immediately turned red in the face out of embarrassment. He abruptly abandoned the Gentiles reclined at his table and quickly joined the Jewish brethren.

The relaxed atmosphere immediately turned tense as Peter's actions had created confusion and hostility between the Gentile and Jewish believers. The quiet roar of rude remarks was still permeating the atmosphere when Paul walked in. Knowing something was a little off, Paul greeted the brethren and noticed the hateful looks being swapped between the two groups. Paul looked at Peter, who sheepishly lifted his glass to hide behind it.

Paul soon discovered what had happened, and he knew he could not let a man like Peter get away with what he had done. The fledgling early church would not be able to survive under this kind of example from its leadership. So Paul confronted Peter and by doing so helped those in the room understand the church of Jesus Christ was for all people, both Jews and Gentiles.

FRAME

Understanding the background of Peter and Paul is important in helping us know why their confrontation did not put an immediate rift in the church. Paul was not a new convert rebuking an elder in the church. Paul had an advantage of understanding how wrong it was for the Jewish members of the church to try and employ old Law traditions on the Gentiles. Based on his actions toward the Gentiles, Peter was influenced by the arrival of the Jewish church members. Paul saw this error and rightly confronted Peter. Paul used this situation as an example of what it looks like when we begin to fall away from the true message of the gospel.

Something similar was happening in the church at Galatia. **Paul was quick to address the issue at hand as he began his letter to the Galatians. (PPT)** Since Paul was no longer in Galatia, he could not mince words. Even more, he had to give warning to the Galatians about the dire consequences of falling away from the true message of the gospel. Paul did not open up the floor for debate. He simply declared the truth of the situation and presented his case on the error. He chose his words carefully in an attempt not to offend anyone; yet his words were honest and direct.

Paul took the time to write a letter, something that could have been used against him should he be in error or offensive in his words. We must understand that honesty and directness can offend people when they are guilty of doing wrong. Therefore, we must ensure we pray and seek the anointing of the Holy Spirit before we engage in confrontation.

Paul questioned the Galatians as to why they had so quickly deserted the original gospel (PPT) (Galatians 1:6–9). He addressed the issue outright, stating the Galatians had turned to another gospel, but it was, in fact, no gospel at all. Paul was quick to admonish the people who had been causing confusion over the new message.

Contemporary Christianity is rife with people who seek to diminish the gospel message. They appeal to fleshly desires for material things or alternative lifestyles in order to tempt individuals to compromise. As humans, we are often impressed by an individual's personality, education, wealth, or public status. This can intimidate people or give space to affirming ideas that are contrary to the Word of God. In the North American church, the prosperity gospel works to glamorize the true gospel by teaching that God does not intend for His people to live meagerly. It states that God's purpose for believers is to prosper, thus proclaiming that material gain is a benefit of serving Christ.

Many mega churches have sprung up through the years, often followed by controversy over corrupt financial practices by those in leadership. Throughout history, human beings have tried to fashion the gospel toward the trend of that particular era. Prior to the twentieth century, the New Thought culture became popular as the development of psychotherapy became more prominent. This "mind over matter" concept leaned toward making humanity into a type of deity responsible for their personal mental well-being, able to overcome any addiction or unacceptable behavior through mental behavioral modification. The Galatians sought to be accepted by the Jewish Christians, thus allowing additional addendums to be added to the gospel. Certain human governing documents—such as the United States Constitution—can be amended as needed in order to form, as the US Constitution states, "a more perfect union." However, the gospel message is already perfect and does not need to be amended or modified.

- **What is Paul's warning about preaching a gospel other than the original?**

Paul declared whom he was seeking to please. (PPT) Paul understood how peer pressure or intimidation could factor into the human characteristic of compromise. By deciding emphatically that he sought to please God over men (Galatians 1:10), he was proclaiming the mindset the Galatians needed to have in order to avoid compromising the gospel.

The words of Paul seem to echo the words of Joshua: "Choose you this day whom ye will serve" (Joshua 24:15, KJV). We must take pause here to ensure everyone understands our purpose is to serve others. Serving people does not equate to pleasing people. Whenever a parent prepares a meal for a child, often a vegetable is provided for proper nutrition. Most children are not avid fans of various vegetables and are frequently compelled to consume the vegetables much to their displeasure. While children do not understand the long-term benefits of proper nutrition, parents are serving their children by feeding them something children may deem unpalatable.

Do parents serve children by allowing them to abstain from eating vegetables? Perhaps a parent mixes vegetables into some ice cream to please the child. However, by doing so, the parent dilutes the nutrients of the vegetables or, at the least, introduces unhealthy calories into the mix, thus making the vegetables of no value. This analogy demonstrates how in trying to please others, we can become susceptible to diluting the gospel with false doctrines designed to please men and not God. Hopefully, over time, children will grow and come to understand the value of proper nutrition. Paul was not speaking of false gods in this situation so much as he was addressing false doctrines. We face this problem of false teachings concerning the gospel today. Paul's warning is still relevant to the church, and we should be vigilant not to stray toward other gospels.

- **Is there a familiarity in Paul's declaration and the question posed by Joshua in the Old Testament? Explain.**

Paul did not seek to admonish the Galatians in his confrontation, but his intent was to warn them about the dangers of seeking to please men instead of God. (PPT) He was direct in pointing out the Galatians were quick to turn away from the gospel message of grace and incorporate Jewish rituals as a means of salvation (Galatians 2:4; 6:1). In his article "What's Wrong with People Pleasing," Charles Stone states, "People-pleasing, approval-motivated leadership afflicts many of today's church leaders. . . . Surprisingly, 79 percent of the leaders in one survey of 1,000 pastors and 91 percent in another survey of over 1,200 pastors admitted to people-pleasing tendencies to some degree in their respective ministries. . . . That desire, however, often makes us susceptible to the type of people-pleasing that becomes problematic" (*Christianity Today*, January 2014).

Having a desire to please people is not inherently a bad characteristic. However, when we begin to compromise what God has already declared in order to please people, we are treading in dangerous waters. A great example of the danger of seeking to please others after God has already declared His will is the story of Balaam found in Numbers 22. Balaam had ample opportunity and warning to correct his situation, but instead he chose a path that led to his destruction. One clear indication we are trying to please others over God is when we begin to justify our actions. Suppose we attended an event and were surrounded by non-believers engaging in sinful activities. We might say we did this in order to witness to someone or simply to gain approval from co-workers or classmates. The sad reality is whenever we compromise our principles to gain approval, we lose our credibility as Christians.

- **What are some indications we are trying to please people and not God?**

Paul gave a brief testimony of his conversion, ministry, and divine revelation of the gospel message of grace. (PPT) Our personal testimony is one of the most powerful tools we have in our walk of faith. Some people do not believe the Bible is the infallible Word of God, nor do they trust denominational religions. With many words or references, they will refute any of the aforementioned; yet they cannot, with any factual evidence, refute a personal testimony. Our interaction with the true, living God can be mocked or scoffed, but it cannot be disproven. Even more, the visible change in our behavior, attitude, and outlook should provide a living testimony to those who might watch us from a distance with skepticism.

Paul was highly educated in the Law and, prior to his conversion to Christianity, even persecuted those who tried to spread the gospel. (PPT) His knowledge of those rituals and customs gave him a greater understanding into the significance of the liberty that accompanied the salvation-by-grace gospel message (Galatians 1:11–24; 2:1–2).

Today we face the problem of people following trends that diminish the gospel message with doctrines that emphasize material gain or living in an impetuous manner. Paul understood the dangers of restrictive ordinances versus the unyielding grace of the gospel. He also understood there must not be a compromise in doctrine to please those who may carry influence. The Gentile believers were intimidated by the Jews, especially since the Jews were the ones who had presented the Gentiles with the all-inclusive gospel message.

- **Why was Paul's testimony important to his message to the Galatians concerning straying from the gospel of grace?**

Paul confronted Peter for his actions concerning the Gentile Christians in the Antioch church (PPT) (Acts 10:1–11:18; Galatians 2:11–21). This admonishment must be viewed with caution. Peter was one of the original twelve; in fact, he was chosen by Jesus to deliver the first sermon on the Day of Pentecost. Paul was one of the Jewish leaders who had persecuted the Christians, so even after his conversion, there were many who did not trust him. Yet his knowledge of the Law was important to the New Testament church. Paul had a greater understanding of how the gospel of grace had overcome the burden of the Law. He witnessed Peter succumb to the pressure of the other Jews and called him out. Paul was in a position of authority, as was Peter, thus this interaction was not a power struggle; this was an act of love toward a fellow believer for tarnishing the gospel. Paul was not seeking to breed contempt or disorderly conduct among the members, only to demonstrate that corrective action needed to be taken in order to clarify the doctrinal question at hand.

- **Why did Paul call Peter a hypocrite for his actions toward the Gentiles in Antioch? Why was it important for Paul to share his confrontation with Peter?**

Paul declared the liberty found only in Jesus Christ (PPT) (Galatians 5:1). No one could dispute Paul's understanding of the burden imposed by the Law. Those living in North America are not accustomed to subjugation to higher authority to the extent of those who lived in the ancient world. Even more, we are less inclined to understand the authority and influence of the religious leaders of that era. Imagine a government that punished people for breaking the Roman laws and a religious group that exercised that same type of authority over people. This must have been mentally unrelenting to the average person. Yet with the liberty of the gospel, no longer would anyone have to carry the burden of the Mosaic law. No more sacrifices or other penances were required, simply a repentant heart and prayer for forgiveness.

We take this for granted today, yet Paul warned not to let this be an excuse for impetuous behavior. Romans 6:1–2 states, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" (KJV). In the next few chapters, Paul went on to explain why we should avoid sin.

Yes, **we do make poor choices and fall, but that is not an excuse to pursue sinful living.** (PPT) If a person is allergic to eating peanuts, would that person keep on eating them? Not likely, but some people will because they love the taste even though it brings them harm. This seems a ridiculous and tame example compared to someone who is addicted to drugs or alcohol, but it is the same principle. People will do things that are bad for them, all the while knowing these things will damage their physical or spiritual well-being. So it is with those who receive salvation yet return to sinful living.

The world may look at us and say we are boring and our lives are too restrictive. Paul did not see it that way. Instead, he highlighted the liberty of conscience we experience when we are honest in our words and deeds and the liberty in our minds when we are not under the influence of addictions. We experience liberty in our ability to love and forgive others in a world that would seek out retribution for being wronged. Philippians 4:7 tells us, "And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (KJV).

FINISH

The late Reverend Charles Mahaney was a well-known minister inside and outside of the United Pentecostal Church. His conversion testimony is an amazing demonstration of how the power of God changes lives. Charlie, as he was called, grew up in a home wracked with conflict as a result of alcohol and drug abuse. As an adult he continued into the depths of sin himself, becoming the leader of a motorcycle gang and accruing a history of criminal activity. He admitted to being incarcerated more than ten times.

However, at some point on this destructive road, he crossed paths with the late Reverend Denver Stanford. Brother Stanford became relentless in his pursuit of trying to win Charlie to the Lord. After another encounter with the law, Charlie again found himself in prison for a long sentence. He testified to calling on the Lord, stating, "Lord, if You get me out of jail, I'll be the biggest nut for God You've ever seen. If not, I won't bother You and You won't bother me." After praying that prayer, Charlie began to sing an old hymn, and the Spirit of peace filled that jail cell. He said it was unlike anything he had ever experienced.

Sometime later the judge who had sentenced him called the prison warden and rescinded the sentence, allowing Charlie to go free. Not long after, Charlie decided to make good on his promise and went to visit Pastor Stanford's church. During the service Charlie became overcome with emotion and made his way to the altar, where he repented of his sins and was filled with the Holy Ghost. Shortly after, he was baptized in Jesus' name; Charlie said he never felt so clean in his life.

At some point in his life, Brother Mahaney discovered he was of Jewish decent. After his conversion, this knowledge motivated him to delve deeply into Hebrew studies and languages. As his ministry began to grow, he was able to understand the Jewish-Christian connections in a very personal way. He never swayed from the fundamental doctrine the gospel espoused. Brother Mahaney's personal history of Jewish decent and his firsthand knowledge of incarceration also helped shape his ministry. Regardless of his previous influences, he maintained the message of the gospel, not being swayed by his lineage or the celebrated status of other people he encountered. He was known as a staunch defender of the faith in Jewish and Christian circles.