

The Gospel: A Relationship, Not a Rulebook

15 Practical Implications of Living by Grace Rather Than Rules

1. We obey God out of love rather than approval.

John 14:15; Romans 8:15

Rules-based : I must obey God so He will love me.

Gospel-centered: Because God has loved me in Christ, I want to obey Him.

2. Our identity rests in Christ rather than our performance.

Galatians 3:26; 4:6–7

Rules-based: I am what I accomplish spiritually.

Gospel-centered: I am a child of God because of what Christ has accomplished.

3. We confess our sins instead of hiding them.

1 John 1:9; Hebrews 4:14–16

Rules-based: If people discover my sins, they will know I am not as spiritual as they think.

4. We extend grace to others because we have received grace.

Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13

Rules-based: People must meet my standards before they deserve my acceptance.

Gospel-centered: God showed mercy to me when I did not deserve it.

5. We stop comparing ourselves with other Christians.

Galatians 6:4–5; 1 Corinthians 4:7

Rules-based: My spiritual worth can be measured against someone else's performance.

Gospel-centered: Every spiritual blessing I possess is a gift of God's grace.

6. Spiritual disciplines become opportunities for communion rather than religious chores.

Psalms 63:1; Philippians 3:8–10

Rules-based: I read my Bible and pray to earn God's approval.

Gospel-centered: I read my Bible and pray because I want to know the God who has already welcomed me.

7. We can experience assurance rather than perpetual spiritual anxiety.

Romans 8:1, 15–16; 1 John 5:13

Rules-based: Have I done enough? Am I good enough? Does God still accept me?

Gospel-centered: My confidence rests in Jesus Christ and His finished work.

8. Repentance becomes a return to our Father rather than an attempt to regain employment.

Luke 15:11–24; Romans 2:4

Rules-based: I have failed God. I must work hard enough to earn my place back.

Gospel-centered: I have sinned against my Father. I need to return to Him in repentance and faith.

9. We serve from gratitude rather than a need to prove our worth.

Ephesians 2:8–10; 1 Corinthians 15:10

Rules-based: The more I do for God, the more valuable I become.

Gospel-centered: Because God has graciously saved me, I want to participate in His work.

10. We become more concerned with the heart than outward appearances.

Matthew 23:25–28; Galatians 5:22–23

Rules-based: If I look religious, dress appropriately, and avoid certain behaviors, I must be spiritually mature.

Gospel-centered: God is transforming my heart, and genuine transformation should increasingly become visible in my conduct.

11. We distinguish biblical commands from personal preferences.

Romans 14:1–13; Colossians 2:20–23

Rules-based: My personal convictions should become everyone's obligations.

Gospel-centered: God's Word is authoritative, but my preferences are not automatically God's commands.

12. We can love people without requiring them to become like us.

Galatians 3:28; Romans 15:7

Rules-based: To belong to our church, you must first fit our culture.

Gospel-centered: Our unity rests in Jesus Christ, not identical backgrounds, personalities, or preferences.

13. We pursue holiness without becoming legalistic.

Titus 2:11–14; Galatians 5:13–16

Rules-based: Holiness is the price I pay to receive God's favor.

Gospel-centered: Holiness is the appropriate response to God's grace and the work of His Spirit within me.

14. We endure suffering without assuming God has rejected us.

Romans 8:35–39; Hebrews 12:5–11

Rules-based: If my life is difficult, I must have done something to lose God's favor.

Gospel-centered: My circumstances do not determine whether I belong to God.

15. Our relationship with God becomes personal rather than merely institutional.

Galatians 4:6; John 17:3

Rules-based: Christianity is primarily about attending the right activities and maintaining religious membership.

Gospel-centered: Christianity is about knowing God through Jesus Christ and living as His redeemed child.

GALATIANS 4: Outline

In an attempt to free the Galatians from the terrible yoke of legalism, Paul appeals to their heads and their hearts.

I. PAUL'S "HEAD" WORDS (4:1-7, 21-31): He offers two illustrations.

A. A legal illustration (4:1-7)

1. The Roman father and his son (4:1-2)
 - a. The frustration (4:1): Until he comes of age, the son can enjoy very little of his father's estate.
 - b. The freedom (4:2): Upon coming of age, the son can enjoy all of his father's estate.
2. The redeemer's Father and the Father's children (4:3-7)
 - a. The frustration (4:3): While under the law, they enjoyed very little of the Father's estate.
 - b. The freedom (4:4-7): Upon coming of age (effected by Christ's death), they can enjoy all of their Father's estate.

B. An Old Testament illustration (4:21-31): Paul uses the example of Hagar and Sarah, two Old Testament women, to allegorize the law of Moses and the grace of God.

1. Hagar (an allegory of the law) (4:21-22a, 23a, 24-25, 29a, 30-31a)
 - a. She was a slave (4:21-22a).
 - b. Her marriage to Abraham was fleshly directed (4:23a).
 - c. Her son, Ishmael, was naturally born (4:24).
 - d. Their son persecuted Abraham's second son, Isaac (4:29a).
 - e. Her child was not considered Abraham's rightful heir (4:30-31a).
 - f. She corresponds to earthly Jerusalem (4:25).
2. Sarah (an allegory of grace) (4:22b, 23b, 26-28, 29b, 31b)
 - a. She was a free woman (4:22b).
 - b. Her marriage to Abraham was spirit directed (4:23b).
 - c. Her son, Isaac, was supernaturally born (4:27).
 - d. This son was persecuted by Ishmael (4:29b).
 - e. Her child was considered Abraham's rightful heir (4:28).
 - f. Sarah represents the new covenant (4:27).
 - g. She corresponds to the heavenly Jerusalem (4:26).

II. PAUL'S "HEART" WORDS (4:8-20)

A. The rebuke (4:8-11): Again he faults them for their return to legalism.

B. The review (4:12-18)

1. Paul reminds them that they once were his friends (4:12-15).
2. Paul wants to know if they are now his foes (4:16-18).

C. The rebirth (4:19-20): Paul will again suffer the pains of childbirth until Christ is fully developed in them.

Sermon: 1-3

GALATIANS 4 — “WHY WOULD YOU GO BACK?”

From Slaves to Sons...and Somehow Wanting the Chains Back

Big Idea:

Through Christ, God has made us sons and heirs. Legalism is the strange attempt to trade the freedom of the family for the rules of the servants' quarters.

BEFORE CHRIST, WE WERE HEIRS LIVING LIKE SERVANTS

Galatians 4:1-3

“You may inherit this whole house one day, but right now pick your socks up off the floor.”

You can possess a great inheritance and still live like you have nothing.

We have forgiveness—but live condemned.

We have adoption—but live abandoned.

We have grace—but keep trying to earn God's approval.

Some Christians approach God like they're checking into the DMV:

“Do I have the right form?”

“Did I stand in the correct line?”

“Did I bring enough identification?”

“Am I sure God is open on Mondays?”

You're family!

LIVING LIKE A SLAVE IN YOUR FATHER'S HOUSE

Galatians 4:1-3

“I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.”

INTRODUCTION: YOU OWN IT—BUT YOU CAN'T USE IT

Because they will stand in front of that refrigerator with the door wide open for eleven minutes staring at food they did not buy while air conditioning the kitchen.

We can be heirs and still think like slaves.

We can belong to the Father and still live as though we are trying to earn our place in His house.

I. AN HEIR CAN POSSESS EVERYTHING AND STILL LIVE UNDER RESTRICTIONS

A child may eventually inherit the farm, but today somebody is still saying:

“Stay out of the barn.”

A child may inherit the company, but today somebody is still saying:

“Do your homework.”

A child may become CEO one day, but tonight his mother is saying:

“Take the trash out.”

There is something humbling about being an heir who still has chores.

THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Paul is explaining the place of the Law in redemptive history.

The Law was not evil.
The Law was not a mistake.
The Law had a God-given purpose.
Earlier, in Galatians 3:24, Paul called the Law a guardian.
It revealed sin.
It restrained sin.
It exposed humanity's inability to achieve righteousness.
It prepared the way for Christ.
But the Law was never the final destination.
The Law was a guardian.
Christ is the Son.
The Law prepared.
Christ fulfilled.

Rules cannot accomplish what only redemption can accomplish.

II. THE PROBLEM IS NOT THE GUARDIAN—THE PROBLEM IS REFUSING TO GROW UP

“guardians and managers until the date set by his father.”
The guardianship had an expiration date.
It was temporary.
The father had already determined when the transition would occur.
That means the restriction was purposeful.
It was never intended to be permanent.
Imagine a forty-five-year-old man saying:
“My parents still give me a 9:00 bedtime.”
We would not say:
“What a wonderfully disciplined family.”
We would say:
“We need more information.”
At some point, something designed for childhood becomes inappropriate for adulthood.
The training wheels were helpful.
The same is true spiritually.
The Galatians had come to Christ.
They had experienced grace.
They had received the Spirit.
Yet now false teachers were persuading them to return to a system of religious performance.
Paul cannot believe it.

“Why are you crawling back into the nursery?”

You have Christ.
You have the Spirit.
You have adoption.
You have inheritance.

And you want to go back to measuring your relationship with God by a religious checklist?
That is not spiritual maturity.
That is regression.

III. RELIGIOUS PEOPLE ARE ALWAYS TEMPTED TO PREFER RULES OVER RELATIONSHIP

There is something attractive about rules.
Rules are measurable.
Grace is harder to control.
If you give me ten rules, I can compare myself with you.
I can say:
"I kept eight."
"You only kept six."
Therefore, I am spiritually superior.
Legalism gives the ego something to work with.
Grace destroys boasting.
That is why legalism is so attractive to religious people.
Because grace leaves us with nothing to brag about.

IV. SPIRITUAL IMMATURITY IS OFTEN MARKED BY AN OBSESSION WITH EXTERNALS

Paul says:
"When we were children..."
Children naturally focus on externals.
That is normal.
Children need boundaries.
Children need visible rules.
Children need immediate consequences.
But maturity should eventually move beneath the surface.
A child asks:
"Do I have to?"
A mature person asks:
"What is wise?"
A child asks:
"How much can I get away with?"
A mature believer asks:
"What honors Christ?"
A child asks:
"Where exactly is the line?"
A mature Christian asks:
"How close can I stay to Jesus?"
There is a major difference.
Spiritual immaturity says:
"Tell me exactly what I am allowed to do."
Spiritual maturity says:
"Help me become the kind of person who wants what God wants."

That is deeper.

God is not merely interested in externally compliant people.

He is forming sons and daughters whose hearts increasingly resemble Christ.

V. LEGALISM CAN PRODUCE OBEDIENCE WITHOUT LOVE

This may be one of the great dangers of religion.

You can obey a rule and still have a rebellious heart.

Every parent knows this.

You tell a child:

“Clean your room.”

The child cleans the room.

Wonderful.

Then you hear:

“This is ridiculous. Nobody else's parents make them do this. My entire life is suffering.”

The room is clean.

The heart is not.

Sometimes Christians treat God the same way.

We obey externally while resenting Him internally.

We attend worship.

We serve.

We give.

We behave.

But underneath it all is:

“God, I did my part. Now You owe me.”

That is not grace.

That is a contract.

And Christianity is not primarily a contract between God and reasonably well-behaved people.

It is a covenant of grace grounded in the finished work of Christ.

God does not merely want clean rooms. He wants transformed hearts.

VI. PAUL SAYS WE WERE “ENSLAVED”

Verse 3 becomes even more serious:

“We were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.”

Paul deliberately uses slavery language.

That tells us humanity's problem is deeper than lack of information.

We do not merely need better advice.

We need liberation.

The Bible's diagnosis of humanity is much more severe than modern optimism.

Our problem is not simply:

“We make mistakes.”

Our problem is:

We are sinners.

We are under powers we cannot conquer ourselves.

We are enslaved to sin.

We are enslaved to self.

We are enslaved to the desire to justify ourselves.

And religion itself can become another form of bondage when we use it to earn what God gives only by grace.

That is sobering.

You can be enslaved to irreligion.

But you can also be enslaved to religion.

You can run from God through rebellion.

And you can run from God through self-righteousness.

One person says:

"I don't need God because I reject His rules."

Another says:

"I don't need grace because I keep the rules."

Both are lost.

One is lost in the far country.

The other is lost in the Father's backyard.

VIII. SOME CHRISTIANS HAVE BEEN FREED FROM SLAVERY BUT STILL THINK LIKE SLAVES

Slave thinking says:

"If I fail, I am finished."

Sonship says:

"If I fail, I run to my Father."

Slave thinking says:

"I must prove myself."

Sonship says:

"Christ has already secured my place."

Slave thinking says:

"God tolerates me."

Sonship says:

"God has adopted me."

Slave thinking says:

"I need to earn His affection."

Sonship says:

"In Christ, I already have it."

HUMOROUS PICTURE

Some Christians live in God's house like nervous hotel guests.

They keep saying:

"Am I allowed to use this towel?"

"Can I sit on this furniture?"

"Is breakfast included?"

"Exactly what time is checkout?"

And the Father says:

"You are not a guest.

You are family."

IX. THE FATHER SETS THE DATE

"until the date set by his father."

The child did not determine the date.

The guardian did not determine the date.

The culture did not determine the date.

The father did.

The father controlled the transition.

And this leads directly into verse 4:

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son..."

Paul is building toward something magnificent.

The Father determined when history had reached the appointed moment.

The Law had served its purpose.

The promises had been given.

The prophets had spoken.

Human inability had been exposed.

And then the Father said:

Now.

And Christ came.

Salvation is therefore not humanity climbing toward God.

It is God entering history at the moment He appointed.

That means grace begins with God's initiative.

We did not rescue ourselves.

God sent His Son.

We did not purchase our freedom.

Christ redeemed us.

We did not negotiate adoption.

God made us sons and daughters.

X. THE GOSPEL IS NOT "TRY HARDER"; IT IS "YOU NEED A SON"

Paul's argument destroys our instinctive religion.

Human religion says:

"Try harder."

"Do more."

"Improve."

"Perform."

"Earn."

The gospel says:

"You need Someone to do for you what you cannot do for yourself."

The gospel is not fundamentally a self-improvement program.

It is a rescue operation.

Jesus did not come to make bad people slightly nicer.

He came to redeem slaves and make them children.

That is far more radical.

Church is not a weekly meeting of people congratulating one another on becoming respectable.

Church is a gathering of redeemed sinners who know:

"If Christ had not come, none of us would be free."

That destroys pride.

The religious person cannot boast.

The immoral person cannot despair.

Because salvation rests in Christ.

XI. HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU ARE STILL THINKING LIKE A SLAVE?

Here are some diagnostic questions.

Do you believe God loves you more on your good days than your bad days?

Do you secretly compare your spiritual performance with others?

Do you become proud when you succeed?

Do you find it difficult to rest in grace?

Do you constantly feel that you must prove yourself to God?

If so, you may be living with slave thinking.

performance to promise,

fear to faith,

slavery to sonship,

earning to receiving.

XII. CHRISTIAN MATURITY MEANS LEARNING TO LIVE OUT OF YOUR IDENTITY

Paul does not want Christians merely to understand adoption intellectually.

He wants us to live like adopted children.

There is a great difference between knowing your status and enjoying it.

A person can possess tremendous wealth and never access it.

A person can have food in the pantry and still think he is starving.

A person can possess an inheritance and live like a pauper.

And Christians can possess the riches of grace while living emotionally and spiritually as though we are still slaves.

CONCLUSION: STOP ASKING WHETHER YOU ARE ALLOWED IN THE HOUSE

Imagine a father adopting a child.

The legal documents are signed.

The child receives the family name.

The child comes home.

A bedroom has been prepared.

A place is set at the table.

The refrigerator is full.

The father says:

"You are home."

But every morning the child stands nervously at the bedroom door.

"May I come out?"

"Yes."

At breakfast:

"Am I allowed to eat?"

"Yes."

At night:

"Do I have to leave?"

"No."

Finally, the father kneels down and says:

"You are not visiting.

You live here.

You belong here.

You are my child."

That is where Paul is headed.

Galatians 4:1-3 prepares us for one of the most beautiful truths in Scripture.

We were children under guardians.

We were enslaved.

We could not free ourselves.

But the Father had already set the date.

And when the fullness of time came, God sent His Son.

Why?

So slaves could become sons.

So outsiders could become family.

So those under bondage could receive an inheritance.

So people who spent their lives trying to earn God's favor could finally rest in grace.

And perhaps the question we need to ask is simple:

If Christ has made you a child of God, why keep living like a slave?

Questions for Study (Galatians 4:1-3)

1. According to verses 1–2, what is true about the child's **status**, and what is true about his **experience**?
2. Why does Paul compare the heir to a slave?
3. What does the phrase **“until the date set by his father”** teach us about the temporary nature of the Law?
4. How does verse 2 prepare us for **“the fullness of time”** in verse 4?
5. What purposes did the Law serve that it could not ultimately accomplish?
6. Why would returning to Law as a means of justification be spiritual regression?
7. What might Paul mean by **“the elementary principles of the world”**?
8. How can both paganism and legalism become forms of bondage?
9. What are some ways Christians today can possess the status of sons while emotionally living like slaves?
10. What difference does it make to obey God **from acceptance rather than for acceptance**?

One sentence summary

Galatians 4:1–3 teaches that God's people once lived like minor heirs under temporary guardianship, but that arrangement was always moving toward the Father's appointed moment when Christ would come and slaves would become sons.