

Galatians

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[0 : 00] You know, these days when I read the news, I find myself asking the same question again and again. I find myself asking, how do we make sense of and explain these headlines?

You know, just this week I was reading my news feed and there are headlines about the ongoing reality of racial injustice, sexual violence. There are headlines about the rise of nationalism in the West.

There are headlines about the outrage culture and the call-out culture that has arisen over the last decade and continues to wreak havoc.

Headlines about the rising political polarization that's dividing our country into smaller and smaller subgroups.

And you look at headlines like this and realities like this and you ask, is this just the result of technology? Is this just the result of smartphones? Is it just the impact that Twitter has had on our culture?

[1 : 01] Or is there something deeper at work? And I find myself longing for some kind of unified theory of everything that can explain what's happening. And I've been thinking about that and I've been reading and studying Paul's letter to the Galatians and I began to realize that if we were to ask the Apostle Paul to explain these headlines, that he would probably pull out his letter to the Galatians and he would probably turn to the middle of the letter to chapter 4 and he would probably point us to the middle of that chapter.

This is the very heart of Paul's letter to the Galatians and many of the themes that we've been looking at over the past several weeks as we've been looking at this letter are distilled here in these verses.

Paul would probably start in verse 8 and read this. Now that phrase, the elementary principles of the world, that's our focus this evening.

Because that word in the Greek is the word *stoikia*. And *stoikia* is a very philosophically dense word. Entire books have been written about the meaning of this word and so it's not often explored or preached on because it's frankly kind of difficult to understand exactly what Paul means with this word.

We translate it as the elementary principles of the world but I want to give you maybe a more helpful way to think about it. When Paul talks about the *stoikia*, he's talking about all of the ways that sin has been written into the operating system of the world.

[2 : 59] He's talking about all of the ways that sin has been written into the code. These are all of the manifestations of sin that tend to show up in societies everywhere.

And that's interesting sociologically speaking that when you look at societies both ancient and modern, when you look at societies both eastern and western, there are certain tendencies, certain characteristics that tend to manifest themselves across the board.

And Paul would say these are the *stoikia*. These are the ways that sin has been written into the operating system. They govern us. They, as he says, enslave us.

They limit and constrain what is possible in life. And he says in the point of Galatians, really, is that Paul is saying that Jesus Christ came to set us free from sin.

And thus he came to set us free from these *stoikia*, these limiting factors. Jesus came to bring an entirely new operating system. And so the gospel isn't just about being saved from sin.

[4 : 11] The gospel is about discovering and making possible a new way to be human together. A new way for society to operate. And so Paul's entire concern with the Galatians is that they are people who have been set free by Jesus and yet they're not living like it.

He says you're living like you're still under the old regime, the old operating system. So what we're going to do with our time this evening is we're going to look at these stoikia, these elementary principles.

And we're going to look at three examples, three ways that sin has been written into the code. And these are things that Paul was facing. But as you'll see, they're things that we face as well because they're present everywhere.

Apart from the gospel, they're unavoidable. So let's pray and then we'll look at Galatians chapter 4 together. Lord, we thank you for your word. And we now ask that rather than relying on human insight or wisdom, rather than relying on spiritual platitudes or principles to live by, that Lord, we would sit under your living word and that you would speak.

And Lord, we pray that by hearing your word, we would be nourished, we would be strengthened, and you would be glorified. And we pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So three ways that sin is hardwired into the world.

[5 : 33] The first example is the example of tribalism. Tribalism. By tribalism, I simply mean the innate human tendency to see people in terms of in-group and out-group, us and them.

People in my group and everyone else. And Paul would say that apart from the gospel, all human beings tend to divide the world into insiders and outsiders.

And you know, this is very evident in Galatia. We've already talked in this series about how divided Galatia was. It was divided religiously. It was divided politically. It was divided along racial and ethnic lines.

It was divided in basically every way you can imagine. Very divided society. But this is also something that happens in societies everywhere.

And in fact, there's a huge body of research that we've mentioned in this series already, but I think it's worth mentioning again, on this innate tendency in human beings. It's called in-group, out-group bias.

[6 : 41] And this research shows conclusively that you can take any group of people and you can divide them arbitrarily by a coin toss, heads group, tails group.

And that within hours, those groups will begin to manifest more positive attitudes toward their own group and more negative attitudes toward the other group.

This is hardwired into human nature. And the same realities that divided Paul's society divide our society as a result. Paul would say that when you see that phenomenon, you're not just seeing sociology.

You're not just seeing evolutionary psychology. That you're seeing stoichia. You're seeing sin wired into the world. And you know, our society is subdivided into smaller and smaller special interest groups.

And you ask people, what's wrong with the world today? And most people have some group that they blame. You know, people will say, well, it's all those on the radical left. It's those neo-Marxists.

[7 : 42] Or it's Trump and his supporters. Or it's the rich and big business. Or it's those conservative Christians. Or it's those secular atheists. Or it's the terrorists. And everybody has some group they want to blame.

It happens in this very church. Right? This happens in churches all around the world. One of the most damaging realities that churches have to contend with is the development of factions and cliques within the body of Christ.

This is the path of least resistance for any group of people. But Paul would say that this is what life is like under the stoichia. And that is exactly why Jesus came. The gospel changes everything. It reformats us. And a great example of this is Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who was a Marxist officer of the Red Army. And in their society, they had very clear lines between good guys and bad guys. And in their world, you sent all of the bad people to the prison labor camps. And then the unthinkable happened. Solzhenitsyn was actually caught criticizing Stalin.

[8 : 52] And so he was then sent to a labor camp himself. And this radically transformed him because he began to form relationships. And his entire worldview began to break down.

And he began to rethink what does it mean to be human. And he began to realize that there's not such a clear line between good people and bad people. And in fact, he says, gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties, but right through every human heart and through all human

hearts.

And once he realized that, he realized that his entire worldview needed to change. And he began to search, who can offer hope to someone with a heart like that? And that's what led him to Jesus Christ.

Right? So the gospel rewrites the operating system. The gospel says that there's no such thing as good people and bad people, that all hearts are broken. And yet all hearts are at the same time beautiful because they were created by God.

The gospel says that ultimately all human beings are at a fundamental level the same because we're all created by God to bear his image. And yet we've all been broken and twisted by sin.

[10:15] And yet for all of those who come to Jesus and ask for forgiveness, we are all able to become one in him. One in Christ. And that's this explosive verse that we spent three weeks looking at.

That for those who are in Christ, there is no longer Jew nor Greek. There is neither slave nor free. There is no male and female. He says all of those distinctions have been done away with. You're all one in Christ.

So this reality, this new operating system, this new way of being human that the gospel brings into the world has been transformative throughout history. I'm always reminded of the city of Antioch, the ancient city of Antioch.

This is the place where followers of Jesus were first called Christians. And when the city was built, they didn't just build a wall around the perimeter of the city.

They also built walls all throughout the city. And in fact, the goal was to create separate zones for every ethnic and racial group represented in the population of Antioch.

[11:19] So they had 18 different walled-off ghettos. And each of those areas had their own cultures and customs and religions. This is literally the architecture of tribalism.

I mean, this is what a tribalistic city planner would do. And this is the way Antioch was until the Christians came. Because the Christians were the first people to go over the walls.

They were the first people to believe in a God who wasn't limited to one ethnic group or one geographic area, they believed that Jesus came to save people from all nations. And that the gospel was meant to be preached to everyone.

And so they went over the walls and you look at this new forming church in Antioch. You read about it in Acts chapter 13. The leadership team of the church in Antioch was made up of people from four different ethnic groups.

That's an amazing thing to look at at this point in history. And what it shows you is because of the gospel, Christians no longer have to be governed by tribalism.

[12:25] In other words, let me put a finer point on it. Christians don't build walls. We go over the walls. That's what it means to be a Christian in our world.

So that's the first example. Tribalism, you see it everywhere, but the gospel frees us from it. We don't have to be subject to it anymore. The second example of these elementary principles is the example of idolatry.

Idolatry. Again, apart from the gospel, all human beings tend to turn good things into ultimate things. To take things that are important and make them ultimately life or death important.

And you see this in Galatia. You had lots of different kinds of idolatry. Paul was dealing with pagans who were worshiping pagan deities. He was dealing with the emperor cult.

People who worshiped the Roman emperor as a divine being. But he was also dealing with Jewish converts to Christianity. Who insisted on continuing to live under the Mosaic law.

[13:33] They had taken the Mosaic law, which was a good thing, and they had turned it into an ultimate thing. This is what determines salvation. This is what determines who's really in with God. And Paul does something shocking with that.

He essentially tells these Jewish converts to Christianity. He says, when you do that, when you elevate the law to the level of importance that you've given it, you're just like the pagans.

And you see, in their worldview, there were two kinds of people. Jews who were in with God, people under the law, and everyone else. And Paul says, no, no, no.

When you live like that, there's no difference. You might as well be a pagan. And for them, that would have been deeply offensive. And that's exactly why Paul says it. He's trying to shock them awake.

He's saying, all of this is idolatry of one sort or another. And you know, idols, as I said before, it's simply things that we take that are often good things, and we make them ultimate.

[14:30] So it could be any good thing in our lives. It could be marriage. You know, the marriages that we have are the marriages that we want. It could be our kids, or the kids that we hope to have.

It could be comfort. It could be convenience. It could be the approval of others, and wanting other people to like us, and think well of us, and respect us.

It could be financial security. See, all of these things are good things. It's good to be thought well of. It's good to have a family. And yet, these things can very subtly become more and more and more important until we find ourselves thinking, unless I have that, I don't know if I'm going to be okay. Unless I, unless that happens for me, I don't think that I'm going to be, I don't think that I'll survive. Or if I ever lose this, it will destroy me.

And when you begin to think that way about anything in your life, that thing has started to become an ultimate thing for you. It's taken hold of your heart in a religious way.

[15:41] So think of the role, just to give one deeper example of this, think of the role that politics has come to play in many people's lives in our society today.

You know, 30 years ago, you could disagree with somebody over the presidential candidate that they voted for. You could disagree with somebody over the platforms or policies that they like. And you could disagree and still be friends.

And nobody would think that it would threaten your friendship. And yet these days, and I hear this all the time, I see it in my own family, politics and disagreements rip families apart.

I mean, there are family members who will not speak to each other because of the presidential election. People who have broken off all contact. Right? And so we ask, why are we so deeply divided?

And the answer is because politics, which is a good thing. You know, God instituted our political leaders. God decrees that He works through our political leaders.

[16:40] He calls Christians to pray for our leaders and to submit to our leaders. And yet this good thing has become an ultimate thing for many people in our country. There was a great piece by Andrew Sullivan that came out at the end of last year called America's New Religions.

And he's talking about the decline of Christianity in the West and the subsequent impact that that's had on the way we view politics. And here's what he says.

He says, so what happens when this religious rampart of the entire system is removed? I think what happens is illiberal politics. The need for meaning hasn't gone away, but without Christianity, this yearning looks to politics for satisfaction.

We no longer just endorse a candidate. We no longer support this or that policy. People are increasingly finding their entire sense of meaning and identity and purpose in politics, in their political party affiliation.

our political world has become a kind of ultimate battleground of good versus evil. And it's interesting, you know, people increasingly don't think of their political opponents as simply people with whom they disagree.

[18:05] We treat political opponents like heretics. We treat them like a heretic would have been treated 500 years ago. You know, and I'm sure there are many people, if they could, they would burn their opponents at the stake.

We may be less religiously affiliated according to a lot of the research. I think that's absolutely true. We're less religiously affiliated, but we're every bit as much religiously inclined as people.

And the reason is because human beings are by design worshipers. We are made to worship. And so if you remove the object of your worship, if you remove that, a lot of people would think, well, then you just continue through life not worshipping anything.

But that's not, in fact, what happens. What happens is when you remove the thing that's up here, it creates a vacuum. And then all of the things that are down here, all of those penultimate things in your life, your political involvement, your family, your job, your desire for security, your desire for affirmation, all of those things that are down here, they start to get pulled upward to fill that vacuum. And so inevitably when you create that vacuum, something else is going to come in and fill it. And so Sullivan is saying that's what, for many people, it's their political involvement.

[19:23] But it could be anything. And so this is what Paul is getting at in verse 8. He says, Formerly, when you did not know God, when there was nothing up here, you were enslaved to

those that by nature are not gods.

That's an idol. Something that's not a god that you treat like a god. But now, he says, you have come to know God or rather to be known by God. The old preacher Thomas Chalmers used to call this the expulsive power of a new affection.

You have something that you're worshiping and that God comes into your life, he breaks into your life. His love and his grace invade your life and they displace that thing. And God rightfully takes his place as your object of worship.

And everything else has to take a shift down to accommodate your new object of worship. Because of this reality and because Christians experience this when the gospel restores them to right relationship with God, to the right worship of God, and because everything else has to shift downward, Christians don't worship political leaders.

They don't worship kings or emperors as being divine beings. And so all throughout history, Christians have been instrumental in challenging totalitarianism on the right and on the left.

[20 : 46] Because Christians know that at the end of the day there is only one true king. And his name is Jesus Christ. And while in this period of time we're called to honor and respect and submit to our leaders, one day those leaders will be held accountable by the one who truly has authority, Jesus Christ.

So Christians are no longer governed by idolatry. We don't have to be slaves to idols. Because we've been set free to worship the one for whom we were made.

So that's the second example. Christians are set free from tribalism. We're set free from idolatry.

The third and the final example of the way that sin has been wired into the world, wired into us, is the example of moralism.

Moralism. Apart from the gospel, all human beings tend to become moralistic. You see this in societies ancient and modern, east, west, happens everywhere.

And by moralism, I don't just mean that we all have a sense of right and wrong. Every society has a sense of right and wrong. But more than that, every society and every person tends to want to assert their moral righteousness and their moral superiority over other people.

[22 : 01] So every society on its own develops a kind of moral hierarchy. Now the moral codes shift from one side to the next. But that impulse to assert your superiority over another person, that's hardwired into all of us.

So Paul was, of course, speaking to a very moralistic culture. We've talked a lot about that in this series. But what we need to see is that our culture is every bit as moralistic. And in fact, I think you can make the argument that our culture is more moralistic than the first century world that Paul was speaking into.

It's just that the moral codes are defined differently. So think about food. Right? In Paul's day, the Jewish converts to Christianity believed that they were morally superior over other Christians because they maintained the practice of only eating food that was considered clean by the Mosaic Law.

Because I eat clean food, I'm morally superior to you. I have a closer relationship to God than you do. And yet, we do the same thing. In our society, we have a very strong moral sense when it comes to the food that we eat.

It's just that we define clean food differently. You know, we define it in terms of, you know, non-GMO, organic, sustainable, locally sourced. That's our version of eating clean food.

[23 : 26] Right? But it's the same thing. And so you get to feel a sense of moral superiority walking out of the store with your bag of Whole Foods. You know, you're asserting your righteousness.

And, you know, it's interesting. You know, along those lines, I kind of have a confession to make. I was, you know, the other weekend, I took Maddox to basketball and he did a great job and he did all the things we talk about, good sportsmanship and play hard and listen to the coach.

And so I wanted to get him this reward and so I said, hey buddy, let's get a milkshake afterwards.

And so the only place that we pass where you can get a milkshake on the way home is McDonald's. So we go to McDonald's and we pull up and I say, hey, I'll have one milkshake. Thank you. And the lady says, is that, will that be all? And I'm like, oh man, you know, and I look at that menu and I end up ordering a bacon double quarter pounder.

This is my confession to you. And it was so good. It was so good. I slammed that thing and on the way home and I'm eating as fast as I can so I don't have to admit to Laura that I've done this.

[24 : 38] And no, it was just the milkshake, I promise. And so I eat this thing and the entire time I'm eating it I have Isaiah's words in my mind, you know, woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips, you know, because I just slammed a double quarter pounder.

And I felt such shame and I felt this sense that, oh, if anybody knew, you know, I would just feel, I feel unclean. I feel unclean. But that's the way we think about our food. That's the sense of morality that often accompanies our diets.

And so the problem with this, the problem with moralism is that every society has these moral codes but moralism quickly becomes judgmentalism. And this is what we see in our culture.

We have an extremely judgmental culture. We, especially online, the internet is filled with judgment and shame. And every day there's a new outrage du jour.

And people want to feel a sense of their superiority and the easiest way to do that without having to get up from behind your computer is simply to call someone out for the slightest infraction.

[25 : 45] And when you do that, you get to feel better about yourself. You're signaling your moral excellence. And so people have no qualms about doing this. And so what we have are we have careers being ruined in an afternoon.

We have lives being destroyed. We have people getting death threats from people they don't even know. And these are public excommunications and they are swift and they're brutal and they're final.

Once you've been excommunicated, there's no coming back. And the problem is is that most religions are built around a similar sense of moralism.

Most religions of the world are built around the same assumptions that if you are a good person and you do good, then you will be blessed and rewarded. And if you're a bad person and you're found out, then you will be punished and condemned.

All religions essentially operate that way except Christianity. Because Christianity is not built within the old operating system. Christianity brings something entirely new.

[26 : 48] It's built around the concept of grace. Grace. Completely different way to operate. So verse 4, when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son, born of a woman, born under the law to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons.

And because you are sons, he says, God has sent the spirit of his son into our hearts crying, Abba, Father. So the gospel utterly destroys moralism because the gospel says that your hope and your salvation is no longer based on your moral excellence.

It's no longer prevented by your moral bankruptcy. In fact, your moral performance has nothing to do with it. It says that God has come into your life and redeemed you through his son.

Not because you earned it, but because he loves you. And that when he does this, he doesn't just forgive you and say, now try not to do it again. He adopts you as his child.

And it says, as a son of God, now for us, we miss the power of that. In the first century, you would have read that. A son of God, firstborn son of God, that's the most privileged position you could hold in their society was to be the firstborn son of a family.

[28 : 08] And so Paul is saying that when you're adopted, you become like a firstborn son. You get the position of highest privilege and highest honor they could imagine. An entirely new identity as a child of God.

And you know what it means to be a child of God rather than a servant of God or simply a follower of God. A child knows that no matter what you do, there's nothing that you can do that will make God love you any more than he loves you at this very moment.

And there's nothing that you can do that will make God love you any less than he does at this very moment. You know that if you're a child, you always have God's love, you always have God's embrace, you always know that you belong to him because you will always be his child.

And so this eradicates moralism. It just takes it out of the equation altogether. You know, to push the metaphor maybe a little far, moralism is incompatible with the new operating system of the gospel.

It has no place in this new way of being human together. So the gospel sets us free which means there's no place for moralism in the Christian community. There's no place for judgmentalism in the Christian community.

[29 : 26] Now you ask, well what does that mean? Like when people are sinning, do we just ignore it? Do we just say it's all okay? No, no, no, no. Quite the opposite. We confront people in their sin.

But not because we're being moralistic, not because we're judging, not because we're asserting our own superiority over them.

We confront sin because we know that we are children of God. And we know that one of the best ways to experience the fact that you belong to God and have His love is to repent.

Because we know the moment that you repent you are drinking more deeply from the well of God's grace. You're being reminded yet again of the depth and the power and the strength of God's love for you.

And so people say, well I want to feel the love of God more. I often say, when's the last time you repented? When's the last time you did a moral inventory and went to your knees before God? It's one of the best ways to experience the fact that you're His child and that He loves you and delights in you.

So the gospel eradicates moralism. Right? So just to kind of draw all this together, and this is just kind of my take on things, I don't think it's a coincidence that as Christianity recedes in the West, at the same time, we are becoming more tribalistic, we're becoming more politically idolatrous, and we're becoming more and more and more moralistic and judgmental, and we have this outrage culture.

[30 : 55] I don't think that's a coincidence because I think Paul would say, Paul's explanation would be, in the West, our imaginations are shaped less and less and less by the gospel.

And whenever that happens, the stoichia become more prominent. And so this is why it is absolutely essential that we recognize that our calling is not simply to intellectually believe the gospel, but what the world actually needs is people who live the gospel out in community, make the gospel visible, make visible a new way of being human together, a new way of building society, a new way of relating to one another.

This is what the gospel is for. And so in our world, when you see a community of people who are actively breaking down walls of tribalism, and when you see a community of people who are politically engaged without being politically idolatrous, and when you see a community of people who believe in grace and forgiveness and restoration rather than moralism and judgmentalism so that anyone can come, no matter how morally bankrupt they are, when you see that kind of community, it is like seeing someone walking on water.

And people look at that and they say, how is that possible? And of course, then we know the answer. It's possible because of Jesus Christ.

And it's possible because of the new life and the new way of being human that He is bringing into the world. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.