



Life of Christ

A study of the life and teachings of Jesus

The Unforgiving Servant

by Kevin Little

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”—*Galatians 5:1*

As we read this verse, it’s easy to picture the kinds of things that were entangling and enslaving the Christ-followers of Galatia—sexual sin, greed, pride, etc.—but for Paul, it wasn’t a list, but a singular focus that could cripple this church: Perfectionism. Legalism.

“You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.”—*Galatians 5:4*

None of us want “alienated from Christ” and “fallen from grace” to describe us, but how quickly do we judge ourselves and others by our performance rather than by the words of God or the gift of Jesus? There is something in us that craves a measuring stick we can control, even if we ourselves can never meet the standard. Paul describes the teaching that infected the Galatian church as “a little yeast that works through the whole batch of dough” (*Galatians 5:9*).

It’s easy to accept, even admire, someone who strives for holiness or perfection, someone who looks like they have their act together. This little yeast seems so innocuous, so innocent. Still, Paul warns that this little infection has the power to bring us to the point of “biting and devouring one another.”

If you have ever struggled with perfectionism, you know that your judgment can’t stay focused on you forever; it will eventually start affecting the way you perceive other people. And then, with your perspective seared, this legalism starts passing from your thoughts to your eyes with the side glance or the stink eye. Eventually, it takes over your mouth, first moving into a disapproving frown over how someone is acting, then breaking into full-blown “mother-in-law” comments that never appear negative on the surface but cut as deeply as intended. Paul ends his warning with the possibility of mutual destruction because that infection spreads from person to person and then, as the enemy intends, destroys any depth of relationship, trust, or love.

So when somebody fails, are you quick to give grace? What about for yourself? When you fail, do you extend grace to yourself? And if the answer is no, then what do you do?

You start with receiving grace before giving grace. Before Paul dropped the hammer on the Galatian church, he had already led them into God's grace.

“But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.” So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.”—*Galatians 4:4-7*

If you really want to be the one who extends grace instead of dishing out judgment, first recognize that the Father calls you “son” or “daughter.” He made you in His image, to reflect and demonstrate His glory on this earth. That is your identity, rooted in grace. Receive it. Don't try to earn it.

Second, acknowledge that Jesus died to redeem you, so you can receive adoption to, or restoration of, sonship (or daughtership). He paid the price because of your value and worth, demonstrating His grace—undeserved favor—to restore your relationship with the Father. Receive it. Don't try to earn it.

Finally, accept the truth that the Holy Spirit, God Himself, came to live inside of you, to stir you up and spur you on towards the things of God, towards your destiny. He did this, not because you earned it or deserve it, but because He wanted to, because of His grace. Receive it. Don't try to earn it.

For those of us who see ourselves in the parable of the unmerciful servant, we need to take a deep dive into the grace of God and linger there until He changes us from the inside out, first silencing the inner critic that's probably anchored to a person or event in our past. Once equipped to show ourselves grace, will we then overflow that forgiveness into all our relationships?

Question If you notice a lack of grace in how you respond to your world, could there be a voice from your past you need to silence? Can you ask God for His grace-filled perspective?

Family Chat How do you respond when friends start saying bad things about other kids behind their backs?

Take Action This week, lower your expectations for how you believe others should treat you. When they fail, choose to show grace towards them. Journal about it, and talk to your life group about your experiences.