

The Approval Trap

THE GOSPEL REVEALED • BIBLE STUDY

Galatians 1:10 | Arvin Assembly of God | Pastor Brian Overturf | September 23, 2026

The Big Question (from Sunday's sermon)

The Question: *Is the crowd's approval worth it?*

The Answer: No. Approval is a trap. You end up the slave of whoever you have to keep happy, and it costs you your freedom to tell the truth. It isn't worth it, because in Christ you already belong to the only One whose approval settles anything.

Sunday's six points: The Pull • The Players • The Pretenders • The Price • The Proof • The Prize

Learning Objectives

By the end of this study, you will be able to...

- 1 Explain the pull of human approval from the way verse 10 opens, and trace it through Saul, Solomon, and the rulers in John 12.
- 2 Describe the competitive, honor-driven world the false teachers came out of, and show from Acts who they were.
- 3 Show from the little word "now" that Paul's own words in verses 8-9 prove he is no people pleaser, and that his accusers were.
- 4 Explain the price of chasing approval, and tell the difference between adapting your methods and changing the message.
- 5 Point to Paul's life, before and after Christ, as proof that a person can get free of the approval trap.
- 6 Define "bondservant" (doulos) and name the prize: an approval already settled in Christ.

The Text

Galatians 1:10 (NKJV)

¹⁰ For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.

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Why Paul Stops to Talk About Himself

In verses 8 and 9 Paul called down the curse of God on false teachers. Twice. It is the hardest thing he says in the whole letter. And the very next words out of his mouth are a question about himself. He stops and asks the room whether he is a people pleaser.

Why would Paul do that? Because somebody said he was. The false teachers were telling the Galatians that Paul never mentioned circumcision, this addition to the gospel, because he was trying to gather followers to himself. So in this one verse Paul answers the charge, and in answering it he hands us six lessons.

Keep one question in front of you: is the crowd's approval worth it? Cross out the word crowd if you need to and write in your own. Is the world's approval worth it? A family member's? The people at work?

The scholars: the charge behind the question

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
LABC <i>Barton, on v. 10</i>	"Undoubtedly the Judaizers had accused Paul of compromise, saying that he taught freedom from the Jewish law to the Gentiles in order to meet their approval and thus win as many converts as possible."
deSilva <i>NICNT, on v. 10</i>	"The rival teachers could readily have responded: 'Paul wanted to make it easier for you to come to faith, and so adapted the message to make it more pleasing to you, to win you over the more readily.'"
Longenecker <i>WBC, on v. 10</i>	"Evidently the Judaizers were claiming that Paul only presented half a gospel in his evangelistic mission in Galatia, purposely trimming his message so as to gain a more favorable response."
Stott <i>BST, on v. 10</i>	"It seems that his detractors had accused him of being a time-server, a man-pleaser, who suited his message to his audience."

1. The Pull (Why the crowd is so hard to resist.)

Galatians 1:10 (NKJV)

¹⁰ *For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.*

Men, or God?

Before Paul ever answers the charge, look at how the verse opens. Right out of the gate he puts two faces in front of you. Men. Or God. And the pull is always toward one of them. Then he names it: "Or do I seek to please men?" There it is. The pull. The

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hunger to be liked, the desire not to ruffle feathers or upset anybody. It is in every one of us, and in some areas of life it comes in handy. But when it comes to the gospel, to your faith, to eternity, we cannot compromise.

Word Study: “persuade” and “please” πείθω (peithō) • ἀρέσκω (areskō)

The first verb means more than to inform someone. It means to win them over, to talk them onto your side. The second verb says the same thing more plainly. Put the two together and you have a speaker who will say whatever it takes to win the room. That is exactly what Paul was accused of being.

The scholars: what the two verbs mean

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
Keener <i>Galatians, on v. 10</i>	“The word translated as persuade ... has a wide range of potential meaning. It most often means something like ‘persuade,’ ‘cause to believe’ (2 Cor. 5:11), ‘believe / be persuaded’ (Gal. 5:10) or (accordingly) ‘obey,’ but it can also include trying to please or pacify someone.”
deSilva <i>NICNT, on v. 10</i>	“Coupled with ‘people-pleasing’ (1:10b), Paul gives us the picture of a speaker who will say whatever is necessary to achieve his or her ends, rather than saying only what aligns with truth”
Dunn <i>Galatians, on v. 10</i>	“Likewise the idea of being a mere ‘man-pleaser’ was well enough known in the ancient world ... the noun from the verb, areskeia, regularly had a bad sense”
Moo <i>BECNT, on v. 10</i>	“in his ministry, he seeks not to curry favor with people but to find approval from God himself”

How old is this trap?

This pull is not new, and it is not small. It has taken down giants. Israel’s first king lost his crown to it. Solomon watched it happen and gave it a name. And Jesus put His finger right on it.

1 Samuel 15:24 (NKJV)

²⁴ Then Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice.”

Proverbs 29:25 (NKJV)

²⁵ The fear of man brings a snare, But whoever trusts in the LORD shall be safe.

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John 5:44 (NKJV)

⁴⁴ How can you believe, who receive honor from one another, and do not seek the honor that comes from the only God?

John 12:42-43 (NKJV)

⁴² Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³ for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.

Saul had the word of God in one ear and the voice of the crowd in the other, and he obeyed the crowd. It cost him the kingdom. A snare is a loop of rope lying in the grass that you don't see until your foot is already in it. The Spanish reads, "El temor del hombre pondrá lazo." A lasso, like the one wrapped around the couple at a Hispanic wedding. The bait in that trap is not money. It is not power. The bait is approval.

Jesus says some people cannot believe because they are too busy trading approval with each other to want God's. And look at the rulers in John 12. They believed. They had the doctrine right. They just would not say it out loud, because of who was standing there. That is not a doctrine problem. That is an affection problem. They loved the wrong applause more. It took down a king. It silenced men who believed. It can cost you the kingdom.

The scholars: why the fear of man is deadly

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
Schreiner <i>ZECNT, on v. 10</i>	"What slavery we live under when we long for the good opinion of others! It is far better to be a slave of Christ than to be enslaved to human opinions of us. Fear of human beings can be deadly."
Schreiner <i>ZECNT, on John 12:42-43</i>	"Again, the reason for their failure to follow Jesus was fear of human beings. Such fear cannot be dismissed as trivial, for we have seen that fear of people may prevent us from putting our trust in Christ."
Wilson <i>Gospel-Rooted Living, on v. 10</i>	"People-pleasers have an inordinate desire to please other people; servants of Christ have an all-consuming passion to please God. People-pleasers are motivated by the fear of man; servants of Christ are inspired by the fear of God."

2. The Players (Who these men really were.)**How divided was the world they came from?**

Years later Paul is on trial before the Sanhedrin, the ruling council. Think of it as the Supreme Court of Israel. Half the room are Sadducees and half are Pharisees, and

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Paul, who grew up in that room, knows exactly where the fault line is. He names the resurrection. One sentence. And the room comes apart.

Acts 23:6-8 (NKJV)

⁶ But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!"⁷ And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. ⁸ For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection—and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both.

Acts 23:10 (NKJV)

¹⁰ Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks.

The men who were supposed to be judging Paul forgot all about Paul and started tearing into each other. The Roman commander had to send soldiers in to drag out a Roman citizen alive. One doctrine, dropped into that room, and grown men nearly rioted. That is the world these troublers came from. Rival camps. Old grudges that went back centuries. Everybody guarding his own little corner of the market.

A system that kept score

First-century Judaism was not one unified body. Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots all competed for influence, even while they shared the same Scriptures, the same feasts, and the same temple. Even among the Pharisees there were divisions. A teacher's standing was measured by his following: how many disciples he drew, and whose names lined up behind his. Your praise, your position, your power, and your prosperity rose or fell with the size of your crowd.

It could turn bitter. The two great Pharisee schools, Hillel and Shammai, loved the same Torah, and later Jewish tradition still remembers the day their quarrel turned violent. And Paul knew that world because he had lived it. He had been one of them, and he had been winning.

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Galatians 1:14 (NKJV)

¹⁴ And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

The scholars: a world that kept score

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
LABC <i>Barton, on 1:14</i>	“Like most religious systems, Judaism established certain benchmarks of progress or growth for its adherents. They were expected to demonstrate ‘advancement’ through education and moral development. Paul proved to be a master. He was on the ‘fast track’ of religious achievement, but was actually in total opposition to God.”
deSilva <i>NICNT, on 1:13–14</i>	“In what Paul calls his ‘former life,’ he had been more on fire for the Torah and the covenant relationship with God that the Torah sustained than his rivals could ever be”

So who were these men?

Luke tells us. At first he simply says “certain men” came down from Judea. A few verses later their identity is revealed: “some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed.” These men were not outsiders. They were insiders. They believed in Jesus, and they were still Pharisees. They came up in the system, they knew its rules, and they still carried its weight on their shoulders.

And it was not only Pharisees. A great many of the priests had come to the faith too. Some of the very men who used to run things in Jerusalem were now sitting in the church, and a man does not always check the old system at the door. Salvation is real, but sanctification takes time, and some men walk in with a lot of baggage. These men still had the credentials, the titles, and a way of carrying themselves that said, listen to me, I am somebody. The pressure to gain followers and please men, just to survive in that system, was still all over them.

Acts 15:1 (NKJV)

¹ And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

Acts 15:5 (NKJV)

⁵ But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.”

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Acts 6:7 (NKJV)

7 Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

Why did it take James to settle it?

The whole church had to gather over this, and James himself, the leader of the Jerusalem church, had to stand up and settle it. That alone tells you how much weight these troublers were throwing around. And they did not stay in Jerusalem. They followed the gospel out to young churches like the ones in Galatia. When they called Paul a people pleaser, they were not confused men. They knew the system. They knew the game, because they were still playing it.

Acts 15:19 (NKJV)

19 Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God.

This was not a vote or a church business meeting. James had to make a decision, and he made the right one. It is recorded in the inspired Word of God. And when the meeting was over, these men went out and followed the gospel into regions just like Galatia. Jesus had already warned about this kind of missionary.

Matthew 23:15 (NKJV)

15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

The scholars: who the troublers were

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
LABC <i>Barton, on v. 7</i>	"They may have been motivated by (1) a sincere wish to integrate Judaism with the new Christian faith, (2) a sincere love for their Jewish heritage, or (3) a jealous desire to destroy Paul's authority."
LABC <i>Barton, on v. 7</i>	"Based on Acts 15:24, the elders in Jerusalem denied giving any sanction to the teaching of the Judaizers, so any claim for their authority was false."
LABC <i>Barton, on v. 7</i>	"the effect these 'teachers' had on young Christians bears chilling similarities with Jesus' description of the missionary efforts of the Pharisees"

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deSilva*NICNT, on 1:13-14*

“The rival teachers, Paul will claim, promote circumcision and Torah observance among the Christian movement precisely to appease more zealous Jews (Gal 5:11; 6:12-13), who no doubt saw themselves also as defenders of the covenant.”

3. The Pretenders (The ones crying people-pleaser were the people pleasers.)

Galatians 1:10 (NKJV)

¹⁰ *For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.*

Word Study: “now” ἄρτι (arti)

Somebody accused Paul of pleasing men, and Paul does not answer with his résumé. He points at the sentence he just said out loud. The keyword is now. As in, right now. As in, what I just said one verse ago. He had just called down the curse of God on false teachers, twice. Nobody trying to please a room opens with a curse. Anybody that bold, calling down the judgment of God like that, is not trying to be liked. His words alone prove he is dead to the approval of man.

The scholars: what “now” points back to

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
LABC <i>Barton, on v. 10</i>	“The little word now has great meaning, for Paul meant, in essence, ‘Reread what I just said and tell me whose approval I’m seeking.’”
Longenecker <i>WBC, on v. 10, citing Burton</i>	“It seems, therefore, that Paul’s response here ‘is as if one reproved for undue severity should reply, ‘My language at least proves that I am no flatterer’”
Moo <i>BECNT, on v. 10</i>	“In pronouncing damnation on false teachers, Paul implies, he can certainly not be accused of currying favor with people.”
deSilva <i>NICNT, on v. 10</i>	“The ‘now’ of 1:10 makes the most sense if taken as a reference to what Paul has just been doing, namely, chiding the Galatians for their lack of discernment and steadfastness and pronouncing curses upon his rivals rather than working out compromises.”

Why was Paul still getting beaten?

Later in the letter Paul explains more. A man softening his message to keep people happy does not suffer persecution. Paul is collecting beatings. That is not the résumé of a people pleaser.

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Galatians 5:11 (NKJV)

¹¹ And I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why do I still suffer persecution? Then the offense of the cross has ceased.

The cross offends because it tells the flesh you contribute nothing. Something in all of us wants to add to our own salvation, so when someone says, here is what you can do to be saved, it sounds more appealing. Take that offense away and the persecution stops. Paul would not take it away.

Where does that pull come from? From our father Adam. The first thing he did after the fall was sew fig leaves together to cover himself. God had to step in and say no, and He clothed them with the skins of an animal. Man has been trying to stitch together his own covering ever since. That is why Jesus Christ, the chief cornerstone, is still a stumbling block to so many.

Genesis 3:7, 21 (NKJV)

*⁷ Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings.
²¹ Also for Adam and his wife the LORD God made tunics of skin, and clothed them.*

The scholars: the offense he would not remove

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
Wilson <i>Gospel-Rooted Living, on v. 10</i>	“He knows his persecution would quickly vanish if he would just quietly remove the offense of the cross (cf. 5:11). But as a servant of Christ, he won’t do it. Indeed, he can’t do it.”
Moo <i>BECNT, on v. 10</i>	“Together these texts ... suggest that Paul was being accused of continuing to do what he admits he used to do, or what he was accused of doing: proclaim the importance of circumcision and ‘please people.’”

So who were the real people pleasers?

Here is where it gets interesting. Paul turns the whole accusation around and hands it back to them. They were not preaching circumcision because it was the gospel revealed. They were preaching it to keep their own reputations, their honor, and their prestige. That is why Paul calls it “a good showing in the flesh.” They were trying to avoid persecution from the very system they came out of.

Look at what they were really after. “They zealously court you.” They were pursuing the Galatians, wooing them, wining and dining them. “But for no good.” They wanted to exclude them from the true family of God, the people saved by grace under the new covenant Christ sealed with His blood, “that you may be zealous for them.” They wanted a following. Build a brand. Count the heads.

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That is the game they came out of. Back in Jerusalem your knowledge of the Torah and the oral law mattered, but so did this: could you draw a crowd? Draw one and you got a seat at the table. And don't think this is foreign to us. There are worlds within worlds and systems within systems. Walk into a hospital, a city council, or a board of directors and you will find the same thing: who you know, how well you're liked, how you climb the ranks. These men did the only thing they knew to do. They started collecting people. And in Galatia it was worse, because they were stealing sheep to make themselves look good. Jesus had already exposed this exact spirit. These troublers were Matthew 23 with a new zip code.

Galatians 6:12-13 (NKJV)

¹² *As many as desire to make a good showing in the flesh, these would compel you to be circumcised, only that they may not suffer persecution for the cross of Christ.* ¹³ *For not even those who are circumcised keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.*

Galatians 4:17 (NKJV)

¹⁷ *They zealously court you, but for no good; yes, they want to exclude you, that you may be zealous for them.*

Matthew 23:5-7 (NKJV)

⁵ *But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments.* ⁶ *They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues,* ⁷ *greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.'*

The scholars: the accusation turned around

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
Keener <i>Galatians, on v. 10</i>	"In this context, by harshly invoking a curse (Gal. 1:8-9), Paul was surely not trying to please people! His rivals in Galatia were concerned with pleasing people (4:16-17; 6:12), but Paul was a servant of Christ."
Wilson <i>Gospel-Rooted Living, on v. 10</i>	"But Paul also knows that the Judaizers are people-pleasers as well. Sure, they've made a good Biblical case for the Galatians to get circumcised, but only so they can, as Paul says, 'make a good showing in the flesh' and avoid displeasing those who have power over them"
MacArthur <i>Sermon, on v. 7</i>	"In Galatians, we'll see, as we study it, the Judaizers who got to the Galatian church and tried to mess it up were interested in popularity. ... It was a glory thing for them, and it was a popularity thing."

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A counterfeit gospel, a counterfeit following

What they were building was not real. Paul already told us their gospel was “a different gospel, which is not another.” There is one gospel, and one gospel alone, as God’s Word defines it. And a crowd gathered around a man who zealously courted them, for that man’s name and his own brand, is not a real following either. It looks like a crowd for God. It is really a crowd for a pretender. That is the irony of verse 10. These men were doing the very thing they accused Paul of.

Galatians 1:6–7 (NKJV)

⁶ *I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, ⁷ which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.*

4. The Price (What chasing the crowd costs you.)**Galatians 1:10 (NKJV)**

¹⁰ *For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.*

Why can’t you do both?

Read the end of the verse carefully. Paul says you cannot please men and belong to Christ at the same time. One of them has to go. Here is what nobody tells you about chasing approval: you end up with a master you never chose. If you won’t pick, the world picks for you. Whoever you have to please, that’s who owns you.

Matthew 6:24 (NKJV)

²⁴ *No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.*

The scholars: one master

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
Stott <i>BST, on v. 10</i>	“On the contrary, no man can serve two masters. And since Paul is first and foremost a servant of Jesus Christ, his ambition is to please Christ, not men.”
deSilva <i>NICNT, on v. 10, n. 33</i>	“Particularly poignant is the saying of Epictetus (Discourses 4.1) that we are the slaves of those whom we seek to please.”
LABC <i>Barton, on v. 10</i>	“The clarifying question of the believer will always be, Who am I really serving? If the answer is ‘people,’ then we will be tossed back and forth by their conflicting demands and expectations.”

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What does it cost the message?

It costs you more than your freedom. It costs you the truth. A man who has to keep the world happy can only tell the world what it wants to hear. The church world has dressed that up and called it felt needs. Anyone can preach to felt needs. Anyone can buy an “At the Movies” sermon series and the graphics pack that goes with it. So let me say this about this pulpit before I say it about anybody else. If I ever start picking my texts by what is popular, trending, or what the market research says, you are not listening to a preacher anymore. You are listening to a puppet, a politician, a slave to this world.

2 Timothy 4:3-4 (NKJV)

³ *For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers;⁴ and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.*

The scholars: what people pleasing does to the message

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
deSilva <i>NICNT, on v. 10</i>	“The root issue here, however, is not merely the activity of persuading human beings, but altering the message so as to make it more palatable, more pleasing, and thus to increase one’s success and appeal.”
Osborne <i>Galatians, on vv. 6-10</i>	“There is far too much shoddy preaching from Christian leaders who seek to entertain rather than to train. Those who do this are preaching to ‘itching ears’ (2 Tim 4:3), telling the congregation what they want to hear rather than what God would have them hear.”
Keener <i>Galatians, on v. 10</i>	“Moralists firmly condemned flattery and warned that true friends spoke truth even when it seemed painful (cf. Gal. 4:16; 1 Thess. 2:5).”
Packer <i>Preaching the Living Word (ed. Jackman)</i>	<i>Packer, explaining Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 2:17, “we do not peddle the word of God for profit.”</i> “we do not preach with mercenary motives, nor do we modify the message in order to please hearers who, if pleased, will smile on us, but if displeased, might become obnoxious to us.”
Packer <i>Preaching the Living Word (ed. Jackman)</i>	<i>Packer, on preaching to listeners who come to church for reasons that have little to do with God.</i> “Preachers, for their part, know that this is how many of their hearers are thinking, so they strain every nerve to speak in a way that will lead persons without spiritual interest to rate them fascinating, relevant and smart. How we love to be rated smart!”

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Is the packaging the problem?

The modern church growth strategy runs the same way. When Rick Warren started his church, he went door to door with a simple survey: Do you go to church? Why not? What would make you come? He built a church around the answers. Over time the rest of us got more sophisticated about it and called it market research or exegeting the community. There is nothing wrong with knowing the people you live among. Arvin is not hard to figure out. The danger is when what people want starts deciding what gets preached.

So hear me carefully. The packaging is not the sin. Turning the lights down is not the sin. You may love it or hate it, but it is not the sin. A worship set that feels like a concert is not the sin. Coffee in the lobby is not the sin. The sin is when the packaging and the marketing start making the determinations about the gospel, when we soften what Jesus asks of a person just to keep things casual and comfortable. Jesus asks you to take up your cross and follow Him.

Luke 14:26-27 (NKJV)

²⁶ If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. ²⁷ And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.

You can fill a room by lowering what Jesus requires. You just can't call the result a church full of disciples.

The scholars: package and content

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
LABC <i>Barton, on v. 10</i>	"Much of church growth philosophy centers on a 'market' approach, discovering what people want and need. ... If our desire is to please people, our packaging of the gospel may take priority over the content. If our purpose is evangelism, then reaching people through felt needs can be legitimate. We must not forget that our allegiance to Christ comes first."
deSilva <i>NICNT, on v. 10</i>	"In Paul's mind, the problem arises not from pleasing human beings but from making this an aim that competes with pleasing God."
Heer <i>Ancient Fire</i>	<i>Heer, after describing how the pulpit and the communion table have disappeared from many church stages.</i> "Changes to the ritual of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ are inevitable, but changes from proclaiming the gospel should not occur."

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Reisinger & Allen*A Quiet Revolution**Reisinger and Allen, describing the seeker-sensitive movement of the 1990s.*

“Many seeker services have even given up on preaching, offering instead dramatic skits, modern music, multimedia and other means of communication to entertain the audience.”

Saved for Wednesday: the lobby

On Sunday I said I would save most of this for tonight. This week I got an email, a text, and a phone call inviting me to “the lobby.” The pitch was that the most meaningful conversations happen in the lobby. The day features church growth technicians giving TED talks. I was also invited to a session on charting a whole year of preaching around topical themes and the natural rhythms of people’s seasons of life. For example: Love in February. A couple of sermons on the cross because Easter is coming. Movies in the summer because everybody goes to the movies.

We used to say, preach the Word, we are not here to give TED talks. If we have to spoon-feed ministers of the gospel TED talks and casual conversation in the lobby, instead of disciplined study, a workman who does not need to be ashamed, we are losing something in the body of Christ. And it will trickle down to the people.

This scoreboard is not only a first-century problem. It came into the American church too. In the revivals of the 1700s and 1800s, preachers began building movements around their own personalities, and new methods brought converts to the front where they could be counted. Read these quotes with the rabbis and their crowds in mind.

The scholars: when the church started counting heads

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
Pearcey <i>Total Truth</i>	<i>On the revival preachers of the 1700s and 1800s. Compare the rabbis whose standing rose and fell with the size of their following.</i> “Their authority came not from having met accepted standards of education or training but from their magnetism and ability to gather a large following.”
Pearcey <i>Total Truth</i>	<i>On Charles Finney’s “anxious seat,” a bench at the front for the convicted and an early form of the altar call. Once people came forward, they could be counted.</i> “Not surprisingly, the practice of counting converts only fed the results-oriented mentality. Already in 1817 a critic of the revivalists could write, ‘They measure the progress of religion by the numbers, who flock to their standard; not by the prevalence of faith, and piety, justice and charity.’”

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Pearcey <i>Total Truth</i>	<i>Her conclusion, carrying the story into today's church.</i> “That same pragmatic attitude lives on today, as Christian organizations build large internal PR machines relying heavily on the latest secular marketing and publicity techniques. The natural outcome of this mechanical mentality, both then and now, is a tendency to measure success by numbers and impact, instead of by the minister’s personal virtue and faithfulness to the gospel.”
Packer <i>Preaching the Living Word (ed. Jackman)</i>	<i>J. I. Packer, on why faithful preaching struggles today. People come to church for many reasons: respectability, heritage, habit, friends.</i> “The problem that preachers face here is that church attendance for many has little or nothing to do with the quest for God.”
Heer <i>Ancient Fire</i>	<i>Ken Heer, on the one thing that has always drawn a crowd.</i> “Preach Jesus and you will never lack for an audience ...”

Why verse by verse?

Chase the approval of the world, even the American church world, and you lose your freedom to preach this Word. If you haven’t noticed by now, the Bible does not pull any punches. It does not water anything down. It is thus saith the Lord. That is why I am convinced expository preaching is the right way to go. Verse by verse, you cannot avoid the hard topics. We take them as they come. That is not bragging. It is the only way I know to stay free of the approval trap in this pulpit.

The scholars: from expository to felt needs

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
Pearcey <i>Total Truth</i>	<i>On how the revival era changed the sermon itself in 1800s America.</i> “Even the style of preaching was transformed: Expository preaching on biblical texts gave way to topical sermons on the felt needs of the congregation.”
Packer <i>Preaching the Living Word (ed. Jackman)</i>	<i>Packer, on topical preaching: sermons built on a chosen theme rather than a passage of Scripture.</i> “In a topical sermon any text taken is reduced to a peg on which the speaker hangs his own line of thought.”
Packer <i>Preaching the Living Word (ed. Jackman)</i>	<i>Packer, on why some preachers drift into topical preaching.</i> “partly, too, because many topical preachers do not trust their Bible enough to let it speak for itself and utter its own message through their lips.”

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5. The Proof (Paul got out, and his life proves it.)

What did the system hand him?

If anybody was ever qualified to talk about getting free from this system, it is Paul, because he had been at the very top of it. He doesn't describe it in Galatians, but in Philippians he gives us his old résumé. Read it like the introduction for a conference speaker: "Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews. Please welcome the apostle Paul." That is how the world works. But Paul is not bragging. He is saying, this is who I used to be. The training, the titles, the track record. He had climbed to the top of the very world we have been talking about.

Philippians 3:5-6 (NKJV)

⁵ *circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee;* ⁶ *concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.*

The scholars: at the top of the system

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
Schreiner <i>ZECNT, on v. 10</i>	"In the subsequent verses Paul will explain further how this is so, for he will argue shortly (1:13-14) that he was respected in Judaism for his zeal and learning."
LABC <i>Barton, on v. 10</i>	"Thus, if Paul wanted to please people, he could have chosen many other routes or stayed a Jewish Pharisee. Instead, Paul's conversion changed his life so completely that his only goal was to please God and serve Christ"

What did he do with all of it?

Rubbish. I like it better in Spanish (RV1960): *basura*. It is table scraps, what you scrape off the plate into the trash. Paul is saying, been there, done that, I have the t-shirt. And he took off the t-shirt and threw it in the trash for Jesus Christ. That is a free man.

Philippians 3:7-8 (NKJV)

7 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. 8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ.

The scholars: status traded for Christ

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
Osborne <i>Galatians, on v. 10</i>	“Paul showed his preference for serving God by relinquishing his high status in Judaism (see Phil 3:4-7) to become a persecuted preacher of the Christian gospel and to suffer egregious abuse for his Lord and for his faith (Gal 5:11; 6:17; 2 Cor 11:23-27). This was not a person who lived for the plaudits of others.”

Word Study: “still” ἔτι (eti)

“If I still pleased men.” The little word “still” looks backward. Many read it as a quiet confession: there was a time this described Paul, when he lived for the approval of his teachers and his peers. Others read it as Paul sharpening the contrast. Either way the point holds. Whatever Paul used to be, that man isn’t the one writing this letter.

The scholars: what “still” admits

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
deSilva <i>NICNT, on v. 10, n. 31</i>	“The adverb ‘still’ might suggest that Paul would admit that there was a time when winning the approval of human beings was a driving motivator, likely a desire prior to his conversion to please his Pharisaic teachers, his peers (whom he also sought to excel), his teachers, and the representatives of the covenant”
LABC <i>Barton, on v. 10</i>	“Paul’s use of the word still offers us a glimpse into his inner self and his past life as a Pharisee.”
Dunn <i>Galatians, on v. 10</i>	“The apparent concession (that he previously had ‘tried to please men’) is simply a way of sharpening the antithesis.”

How did he get free?

He tells us in this very letter. He died. You cannot shame a dead man. You cannot pressure him or flatter him or bribe him. The old Paul, the one who needed the applause, was crucified. And near the end of the letter he says it one more way. The whole system of who-impresses-who is a dead thing to Paul now. He boasts in one thing. The cross.

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Galatians 2:20 (NKJV)

²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Galatians 6:14 (NKJV)

¹⁴ But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

The scholars: crucified to the applause

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
Wilson <i>Gospel-Rooted Living, on v. 10</i>	“No one understood the shame of bearing the cross better than the Apostle Paul. No one suffered more for serving Christ or was more shamefully treated than he.”
Wilson <i>Gospel-Rooted Living, on v. 10</i>	“He has had to learn the hard way that a servant of Christ cannot avoid the humiliation, cannot run from the shame of the cross.”

Scars, not accolades

A people pleaser does not collect scars. A people pleaser collects accolades and accomplishments. If you want everybody to like you, sell ice cream. Nobody beats up the ice cream man. But when Paul got free from the need to please people, God took him from persecutor to persecuted. He went from handing out the beatings to taking them, and he called that a promotion.

Galatians 6:17 (NKJV)

¹⁷ From now on let no one trouble me, for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.

The scholars: from persecutor to persecuted

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
Keener <i>Galatians, on v. 10</i>	“Pleasing God rather than people meant that he moved from persecutor to persecuted (1:13; 4:29; 5:11).”
Schreiner <i>ZECNT, on v. 10</i>	“Conversely, as a Christian he is persecuted (5:11) and beaten (6:17). His suffering as an apostle verifies that he had become a ‘slave’ ... of Christ, that he was vilified and attacked just like his Lord.”

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6. The Prize (The one approval worth your whole life.)**Galatians 1:10 (NKJV)**

¹⁰ For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.

Word Study: “bondservant” δοῦλος (doulos)

Most of our Bibles soften that word. A better translation is slave. A servant has a job, like an employee. A slave has an owner. And if you have a problem with Jesus Christ owning you, Paul will tell you that you are not your own. You were bought with a price, the precious blood of Jesus. Paul is saying, I am owned, and I am owned by Him. Remember James? He did not introduce himself as the brother of Jesus. He introduced himself as a bondservant.

1 Corinthians 6:19–20 (NKJV)

¹⁹ Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?²⁰ For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

James 1:1 (NKJV)

¹ James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings.

The scholars: servant or slave?

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
Osborne <i>Galatians, on v. 10</i>	“A better translation than ‘servant’ of the word <i>doulos</i> in this context would be ‘slave.’ Paul not only refrained in every way from seeking to please others but, quite to the contrary, completely surrendered himself to Christ as a bond-slave ...”
Moo <i>BECNT, on v. 10</i>	“Paul clearly believes himself to be a ‘slave of Christ,’ language that both connotes (personally) his total dependence upon and dedication to the Lord Jesus ... as well as his ‘official’ status”

Can a slave have two owners?

A slave owed absolute and exclusive loyalty to one master. There was no such thing as a slave with two owners. Nobody split the week. That is the prize. Not that you finally get everybody to approve of you, but that you already belong to the only One whose approval settles anything.

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The scholars: owned by one Master

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
Dunn <i>Galatians, on v. 10</i>	“And his readers would know well that a slave owed absolute and exclusive loyalty to his master; as a mere chattel of his master he could have no obligations to another.”
deSilva <i>NICNT, on v. 10</i>	“It was nobler to be a deity’s slave than a slave of public opinion”
Longenecker <i>WBC, on v. 10</i>	“Paul recognizes the incongruity of trying to be both a ‘servant of Christ’ and a ‘man pleaser.’”

Who is testing your heart?**1 Thessalonians 2:4 (NKJV)**

⁴ But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts.

“As we have been approved by God.” Somebody needs to hear that. You have been approved. You don’t have to go looking for validation anywhere else. Some of us carry wounds from childhood, still chasing the approval of a mother or a father. The gospel truth is that you have a heavenly Father, and He has approved you. More than that, He trusts you with the gospel. But notice the kicker: “not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts.” Somebody is always going to test your heart. God on one side, the world on the other.

The scholars: an audience of One

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
Fee <i>NICNT (Thessalonians), on 1 Thess 2:4</i>	“But ‘pleasing God,’ meaning to live in such a way as to bring pleasure to God, is always the proper goal for the believer”
Fee <i>NICNT (Thessalonians), on 1 Thess 2:4</i>	“For Paul this is the ultimate examination, because the all-seeing, all-knowing God has put Paul and his companions to the test, as it were, and have done so in the place that counts ... and they therefore have God’s approval.”
Keener <i>Galatians, on v. 10</i>	“Whenever any conflict between pleasing God and pleasing people existed, Paul wanted to please God rather than people (1 Thess. 2:4).”
deSilva <i>NICNT, on v. 10</i>	“Paul’s own example challenges us to remember that, in every encounter, in every decision, in every intervention, there is One whom we must please, there is One to whom we, as Christ’s slaves, are answerable.”

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LABC*Barton on 1 Thess 2:4*

“Attempting to gain the approval of others will distract believers from pleasing God. As they do God’s will, they must resist the desire to please people. The clarifying question of the believer should always be Who am I really serving? If the answer is ‘people,’ then the believer will be tossed back and forth by conflicting demands and expectations. But if the answer is consistently ‘Christ,’ the believer will have only one person to please and will not have to worry about how much or how little he or she is pleasing others.”

What did John do with his crowd?

Let me show you one more man who understood this. A preacher before Paul who had a following of his own. People crawled out of the woodwork to see John the Baptist, the wild man who ate locusts and wild honey. Pharisees, Sadducees, everybody had eyes on him. Then his own disciples came to him nervous: everybody is going over to Jesus now. Remember the system. They were really saying, we are losing numbers, credibility, status, and power. And John gave them the freest answer a man ever gave. He didn’t measure success the way Judaism measured it or the way the world measures it today. He pointed people to Jesus, handed them over, and called that his joy. That is a man who found something better than being followed or having a seat at the table.

John 3:26 (NKJV)

²⁶ *And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!”*

John 3:30 (NKJV)

³⁰ *He must increase, but I must decrease.*

The scholars: the man who gave his crowd away

SCHOLAR	KEY CONTRIBUTION
Morris <i>NICNT (John), on John 3:30</i>	“The last words of the Baptist to be recorded in this Gospel form surely one of the greatest utterances that ever fell from human lips. It is not particularly easy in this world to gather followers about one for a serious purpose. But when they have been gathered it is infinitely harder to detach them and firmly insist that they go after another. It is the measure of John’s greatness that he did just that. Jesus, he says, ‘must’ become greater.”

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Packer*Preaching the Living Word (ed. Jackman)**Packer, on preachers who draw attention to themselves instead of Christ. John the Baptist is the picture of the opposite.*

“James Denney said that you cannot convey the impression both that you are a great preacher and that Jesus Christ is a great Saviour”

Why is the verdict already in?

If you belong to Christ, God has already made His decision about you. You don't have to earn His approval. You don't have to wonder what He thinks. He made us accepted. That is the word some of you have been longing for. People pleasing is exhausting because approval has to be won again every single day. The world can love you one day and hate you the next. You were the greatest thing since sliced bread yesterday, and today they ask, what have you done for me lately?

Ephesians 1:6 (NKJV)

⁶ *to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.*

Remember the week Jesus was crucified? The crowd praised Him on Palm Sunday, and a few days later the same crowd shouted, “Give us Barabbas.” Is that who you want to give your loyalty to? A flip-flopping world where you have to check your approval ratings every week like a politician? The approval of God, in Christ, was settled once and for all. It was settled at the cross. God wants you to know that you are His.

Matthew 21:9 (NKJV)

⁹ *Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: “Hosanna to the Son of David! ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!’ Hosanna in the highest!”*

Matthew 27:21-22 (NKJV)

²¹ *The governor answered and said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release to you?” They said, “Barabbas!”²² Pilate said to them, “What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?” They all said to him, “Let Him be crucified!”*

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Pastoral Takeaways

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|----------|---|
| 1 | The bait in the trap is approval. Not money, not power. Solomon called the fear of man a snare, a loop of rope in the grass you don't see until your foot is in it. Name what is pulling on you before it costs you the kingdom. |
| 2 | Whoever you must please owns you. You cannot serve two masters. If you won't choose, the world chooses for you. Ask the clarifying question: who am I actually serving right now? |
| 3 | The accusers were the pretenders. The men crying "people pleaser" were pushing circumcision to protect their own standing. The loudest accusation is often a confession. Watch the fruit, not the volume. |
| 4 | People pleasing costs you the truth. A man who must keep the world happy can only tell it what it wants to hear. The package is not the sin. The sin is when the package starts deciding the content. |
| 5 | Adapt the method, never the message. The lights, the coffee, the feel of the worship set are not the sin. Flex on methods to reach people. Never soften what Jesus requires to please them. |
| 6 | Scars, not accolades. If you want everybody to like you, sell ice cream. Paul went from handing out beatings to taking them and called it a promotion. A servant of Christ measures a life by faithfulness, not applause. |
| 7 | The verdict is already in. Approval you chase has to be won again every morning. Approval in Christ was settled once, at the cross. You are "accepted in the Beloved." Rest there. |

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Discussion Questions for Home or Group

- 1** Observation: Read verse 10 slowly and underline the two words that point backward, “now” and “still.” What do they tell you about how this verse connects to the curse in verses 8–9? (See Word Study: “now,” pg. 8.)
- 2** Observation: Circle the two audiences Paul sets against each other in the verse, men and God. In your own words, what is Paul saying you cannot do at the same time?
- 3** Observation: Read Acts 15:1 and 15:5. Who were the “certain men,” and what does it tell you that they came up through the system? (See “So who were these men?” pg. 6.)
- 4** Interpretation: Paul answers the charge by pointing at the sentence he just said, not at his résumé. Why is the curse better proof than a list of credentials?
- 5** Interpretation: Read Genesis 3:7 and 21. Adam sewed fig leaves; God made tunics of skin. Why does something in us still want to add to our salvation, and why does “you contribute nothing” offend the flesh?
- 6** Interpretation: Read Luke 14:26–27. What does Jesus ask of a disciple, and what happens to a church when the packaging starts softening those words? (See “Is the packaging the problem?” pg. 13.)
- 7** Application: Go back to the Big Question and cross out “crowd.” Write in the name of the person, group, or system whose approval pulls on you most. What has that approval cost you so far?
- 8** Application: Think about “the lobby,” TED talks, and a preaching calendar built around the seasons of life. Where is the line between packaging and content? Name one thing in your own life where the package has started deciding the content. (See “Saved for Wednesday,” pg. 14.)
- 9** Application: The crowd praised Jesus on Palm Sunday and shouted for Barabbas days later. How does knowing God’s verdict on you was settled once, at the cross, change how you carry other people’s opinions this week?

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Quick Review

This isn't a test. It's a chance to see how much of Sunday's truth is already yours. The answers are at the bottom. Take it as encouragement.

1	Verse 10 opens with a little word that reaches back to the curse of verses 8-9. That word is: (a) "but" (b) "now" (c) "therefore"
2	True or False: Paul answers the charge of people pleasing by listing his credentials.
3	Israel's first king lost his crown because he "feared the people and obeyed their voice." His name was _____.
4	Solomon's name for the fear of man was a _____, a hidden trap.
5	In Acts 15:5 the men pushing circumcision were believers from the sect of the: (a) Sadducees (b) Pharisees (c) Zealots
6	According to Galatians 6:12, the false teachers pushed circumcision mainly so that they might: (a) obey Moses (b) not suffer persecution for the cross (c) help the Gentiles
7	True or False: The packaging itself (the lights, the coffee, a concert feel) is the sin.
8	A "bondservant" (doulos) is better translated: (a) volunteer (b) hired hand (c) slave
9	John the Baptist's answer to "we are losing the numbers" was: "He must _____, but I must _____."
10	The one approval that is already settled, "accepted in the Beloved," was settled once, at the _____.

Answer Key: 1) b · 2) False. He points at the curse he just pronounced · 3) Saul · 4) snare · 5) b · 6) b · 7) False. The sin is when the package starts deciding the content · 8) c, slave · 9) increase / decrease · 10) cross.