

The Approval Trap

THE GOSPEL REVEALED • PART 5

Galatians 1:10 | Arvin Assembly of God | Pastor Brian Overturf | September 20, 2026

INTRODUCTION

Last week: who has the right to change the gospel? Nobody. Not the man who brought it to you. Not even Paul. Not an angel from heaven. Then Paul turns around and asks the room whether he is a people pleaser. Why? Because somebody said he was.

Galatians 1:10

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.**

They were saying Paul left out circumcision only to keep his followers happy... that he is a people pleaser. Paul answers that he is not after the approval of any man.

Is the crowd's approval worth it?

Paul's answer is no. He answers to God, not to the crowd. And in this one verse there are lessons we can learn.

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

| For do I now persuade men, or God? (Gal. 1:10)

Right out of the gate Paul puts two faces in front of you. Men, or God. And the pull is always toward one of them: the hunger to be liked. It is not new, and it is not small. It has taken down giants. Israel's first king lost his crown to it.

1 Samuel 15:24

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."**

He had the command of God in one ear and the crowd in the other. He obeyed the crowd, and it cost him the kingdom. Solomon watched it happen and gave it a name.

Proverbs 29:25

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

A snare. A loop of rope in the grass you don't see until your foot is already in it. And the bait is not money or power. The bait is approval. Then Jesus put His finger right on it.

John 5:44

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

Some people cannot believe because they are too busy trading approval with each other to want God's. And Jesus watched it happen.

John 12:42-43

⁴² **Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him...** ⁴³ **for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.**

MY NOTES

They believed. They actually believed. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess Him out loud. That is not a doctrine problem. It is an affection problem. They loved the wrong applause more.

2. The Players (Who these men really were.)

| ...certain men came down from Judea... (Acts 15:1)

Let me show you how divided and cutthroat that world was. Years later Paul stands on trial before the Sanhedrin, and the room is split down the middle. Half Sadducees, half Pharisees. Watch what he does with one sentence.

Acts 23:6-8

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.

One sentence. He named the resurrection, and the room came apart.

Acts 23:10

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 supposed to be judging Paul forgot all about him and started tearing into each other, until the Roman commander had to drag Paul out to keep him from being pulled to pieces. One doctrine, dropped into that room, and grown men nearly rioted. That is the world these troublemakers came from: rival camps, old grudges, everybody guarding his own corner.

Even among the Pharisees there were divisions. Your success was measured by how many disciples you had, who drew the largest crowds. Your praise, position, power and prosperity all rode on how many followed you. Paul knew that world because he had lived it. So who were the players accusing Paul?

Acts 15:1

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.”

At first Luke just says “certain men.” A few verses down their identity is revealed.

Acts 15:5

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.”

Some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed. Not outsiders. Insiders. They believed in Jesus and were still Pharisees. They came up in the system and still carried its weight. And it was not only Pharisees.

Acts 6:7

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.

Priests. Pharisees. Some of the very men who used to run things in Jerusalem now sitting in the church. And a man does not always check the old system at the door. They still had the credentials, the titles, the way of carrying themselves that says, listen to me, I am somebody. That is why adding circumcision to the gospel was no small thing. It is why the whole church had to gather over it, and why James himself had to stand up and settle it.

Acts 15:19

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

It took the top man in Jerusalem to pass this decree. That tells you how much weight these troublemakers were throwing around. And they did not stay in Jerusalem. They followed the gospel out to young churches like Galatia. So when they called Paul a people pleaser, they were not confused men. They knew the game, because they were still playing it. They just wanted you to believe they weren't.

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

| For do I now persuade men... (Gal. 1:10)

Paul does not answer the accusation with his accomplishments. He points at the sentence he just said. Look at the little word now. For do I now persuade men. As in, right now, 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. His words alone prove he is dead to those things.

Galatians 5:11

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

A man softening his message to keep people happy does not collect beatings. That is not the résumé of a people pleaser. And the cross is offensive because it is easier to add works to it. Something in our flesh wants to contribute to our salvation, so when someone says here is what you can do to be saved, it sounds appealing. It offends the flesh to hear you bring nothing to the table. Then Paul hands the accusation right back to them.

Galatians 6:12

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.

The men calling Paul a people pleaser were the people pleasers. They preached circumcision to keep their own reputation, honor and prestige, and to avoid persecution from the very system they supposedly came out of. And look at what they were really after.

Galatians 4:17

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

They wanted you to follow them. Build a following. Build a brand. Count the heads. Back home you were “somebody” if people followed you, so they walked into a church and started collecting people, stealing sheep to make themselves look good. Jesus had exposed this exact spirit years before.

Matthew 23:5-7

⁵ But all their works they do to be seen by men... 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.’

Do the works, gather the crowd so men will see. Get the seat, the title, the name. These troublemakers were just Matthew 23 with a new zip code. But what they built was not real, just like what they preached was not a real gospel.

Galatians 1:6-7

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

A different gospel, but the truth is there is no other gospel. And a crowd gathered around a man for his own name and brand is not a real following either. It is a counterfeit, a crowd for a pretender. Here is the irony: these men were doing the very thing they accused Paul of.

4. The Price (What chasing the crowd costs you.)

| For if I still pleased men... (Gal. 1:10)

Read the end of the verse carefully. You cannot please men and belong to Christ at the same time. One of them has to go. Because here is what nobody tells you about chasing approval: you end up with a master you never chose.

Matthew 6:24

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.

You can only have one master. You cannot serve God and the crowd. And if you won't pick, the world picks for you. Whoever you have to please is who owns you. It costs you more than your freedom. It costs you the truth, because a man who has to keep the world happy can only tell the world what it wants to hear. Anybody can preach to felt needs and tell people what they want to hear. Paul called it itching ears.

2 Timothy 4:3

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;

So I will say it about this pulpit first: if I ever start picking texts by what is popular or trending or what I think you want to hear, you are not listening to a preacher anymore. You are listening to a puppet.

The modern church-growth strategy runs the same way. Find out what people want and give them that. And the danger is always the same: when pleasing people becomes the goal, the packaging of the gospel starts to matter more than the gospel.

The packaging is not the sin. Lights are not the sin. A good worship set is not the sin. Coffee in the lobby is not the sin. The sin is when the package starts determining the content, when we quietly soften what Jesus asks just to keep people comfortable. You can fill a room by softening what Jesus requires. You just can't call the result a room full of disciples. That is the price. This is why we preach verse by verse: we are not avoiding the hard things or chasing seasonal trends.

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

| I have been crucified with Christ... (Gal. 2:20)

If anyone was qualified to talk about getting free from this system, it is Paul, because he had been at the very top of it. Listen to how he describes his old life.

Philippians 3:5-6

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.**

Every credential the system could hand out. He is not bragging. He names the training, the titles, the track record, and then look at what he did with all of it.

Philippians 3:7-8

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... and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ.**

Rubbish. Garbage. Table scraps you scrape off the plate into the trash. Been there, done that, and he threw the t-shirt in the trash for Christ. That is a free man. And how did he get free?

Galatians 2:20

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.**

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. The man standing here now lives by the Son of God who loved him and gave Himself for him.

Galatians 6:14

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 whole system of who-impresses-who is a dead thing to Paul now. He boasts in one thing: the cross. And he had the marks to prove it.

Galatians 6:17

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

The marks. Scars. A people pleaser does not collect scars; he collects accolades. Pleasing God instead of people moved Paul from persecutor to persecuted, from handing out the beatings to taking them. And he called that a promotion.

6. The Prize (The one approval worth your whole life.)

| ...I would not be a bondservant of Christ. (Gal. 1:10)

Most of our Bibles soften that word. A better translation is slave. A servant has a job; a slave has an owner. Paul is saying, I am owned, and I am owned by Him. A slave owed absolute, exclusive loyalty to one master. Nobody split the week. That is the prize. Not that you finally get everyone to approve of you, but that you already belong to the only One whose approval settles anything.

1 Thessalonians 2:4

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.

Somebody is always testing your heart.

Let me show you one more man who understood this. A preacher before Paul with a following of his own. His name was John.

John 3:26

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!”

His own men came nervous: Rabbi, everybody is going over to Jesus now. They were really saying, we are losing the numbers. And John gave them the freest answer a man ever gave.

John 3:30

³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease.

He did not measure his success by the crowd. He pointed to Jesus and handed them over, and he called that his joy. That is a man who found something better than being followed.

CONCLUSION

If you belong to Christ this morning, the verdict on you is already in. You do not have to earn it every morning.

Ephesians 1:6

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

People pleasing is exhausting because approval has to be won again every single day. The world could love you today and hate you tomorrow. But the approval of God, in Christ, was settled once. It was settled at the cross, by a Man who was not trying to please anybody in that crowd. They praised Him on Palm Sunday, and days later screamed, Give us Barabbas. He stayed on the cross anyway.

Stop auditioning for a crowd that can never save you. You already belong to the One whose approval is settled.