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# INTRODUCTION TO THE *J-CURVE* INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDY SERIES

“I’ve believed the gospel. Now what?”

Believing *more* seems like the correct response. But the more you focus on believing, the more you struggle to live out your faith. If this describes you, you are not alone.

Scripture gives us greater guidance than “just believe.” The apostle Paul explains how we live out the gospel in Philippians 3:9-10, when he aspires to:

“<sup>9</sup> be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.”

Luther’s rediscovery of justification by faith—fueled by his reflection on this verse—liberated the church like never before and is rightly celebrated. But we are less enthusiastic about the truth that follows:

“<sup>10</sup>— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.”

Paul acknowledges something we’d rather gloss over and have largely ignored as a church: Jesus’ life takes a downward path into death before moving upward into resurrection.

If you think of it visually, you can trace out the letter “J.” We see Jesus call this arc of the gospel “the J-Curve.” The apostle Paul describes the J-Curve as the normal Christian life<sup>1</sup>—a reenacting of the death and resurrection of Jesus—but it doesn’t feel normal to most Christians.

The *J-Curve* Interactive Bible Study is a series of six units that search out what it means to faithfully live the kind of dying-resurrection life Paul describes in Philippians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philemon, and Acts.<sup>2</sup> By exploring these letters together, we catch Paul’s radical vision of living life in the shape of the J-Curve—a vision that lies at the heart of Paul’s definition of what it means to be a Christian.

Living in the *J-Curve* means we don’t have to succumb to our allergy to suffering or equate God’s favor with earthly success. Embracing the J-Curve renews our hope in a dark world, draws us into fellowship with God’s people, and radically re-centers our daily lives on Christ. And it answers our deep and earnest question: “I’ve believed the gospel. Now what?”

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<sup>1</sup> Phil. 1:29, 2:5-9, 3:10-11

<sup>2</sup> The theme is dominant in these Pauline letters but muted somewhat in Romans and Galatians.

## **Unit 1: United With Christ**

Union with Christ—being “in Christ”—doesn’t sound like the solution to a real problem. But a careful study of Philippians 3:1-11 reveals that our problems with legalism and the Flesh are solved by our union with Christ. Justification by faith liberates us from human pride and despair by giving us righteousness as a gift. This lays the groundwork for understanding how the J-Curve builds on justification by faith and makes union with Christ come alive in a way that simply believing the gospel by itself doesn’t.

## **Unit 2: The Descent of Love**

We take a closer look at the patterns and structure of the J-Curve through this study of Philippians 2:1-9, discovering how humility and incarnation shape the downward journey into death. Understanding that our justification is grounded in Jesus’ resurrection, we see that the J-Curve is the shape of both unity and purity in the church. We then explore how the J-Curve looks in Paul’s life and in the lives of his fellow workers and how he calls the Philippians to live it out.

## **Unit 3: The Wisdom of the Cross**

The Corinthian church is familiar with justification by faith, but the gospel sits like a mist over their essentially pagan ways of relating to one another. So Paul doesn’t just preach the gospel to these believers. He embodies it, living out the J-Curve among them as one who is “enslaved by the gospel.” As we study 1 Corinthians, we begin to see how the J-Curve shapes the way a gospel community lives together.

## **Unit 4: Thorn in the Flesh**

In 2 Corinthians—Paul’s “Romans” for the J-Curve—Paul digs deeper into the J-Curve life when he is attacked by the Corinthian church. His pattern of not just believing the gospel but also reenacting it produces a gospel community that reflects the dying-resurrection life of Jesus and leads to Paul’s reconciliation with the church.

## **Unit 5: Transformed by Hope**

We follow Paul in Acts as he journeys to Jerusalem and then Rome, watching how he experiences the dying and rising of Jesus in the midst of beatings, imprisonments, and persecution of all types. His everyday experience of suffering is transformed by the hope he has in Christ, and that transformation impacts the shape of his gospel community. The book of Philemon provides a glimpse into what that community looked like for Paul.

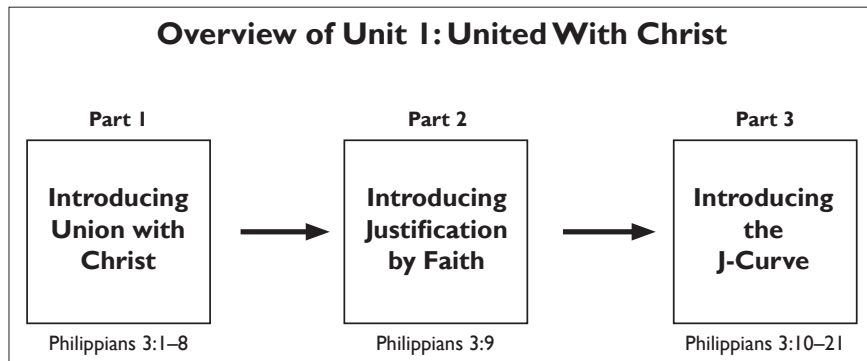
## **Unit 6: Immersed in Gospel Community**

We begin with the Gospels, looking at how Jesus lays the groundwork for a distinctive gospel community and then how Paul carries that out in his Greco-Roman context. This final J-Curve study gives us a vision for this type of gospel-shaped community—balancing the outward forces of mission with the inward forces of community—where Jesus’ death and resurrection is continually reenacted. Spoiler alert: it is a touch of heaven!

# KEY CONCEPTS OF J-CURVE STUDY, UNIT 1: UNITED WITH CHRIST

The gospel isn't for just the beginning of the Christian life, but the whole life.

1. Our Flesh is allergic to God, the true source of life, and is always seeking alternative sources of life. It wants to be “in” something other than God.
2. Legalism is the Flesh's measuring rod. If I'm not that bad, then following a few rules is all I need.
3. Union with Christ isn't just a theological idea. We are always in union with something, either an idol or God. We naturally want “in.”
4. Union with Christ is the frame for justification by faith. Justification by faith is inseparable from being “in Jesus.”
5. Justification is wholly a work of God received by faith. Even faith is a gift of the Spirit.
6. Justification by faith shapes how we do life. It frees us from both the pursuit of boasting and also the fear of failure and draws us into Christ.
7. The J-Curve describes Jesus' path downward into death and upward into resurrection.
8. The normal Christian life looks like the J-Curve. We are always dying and rising.
9. We don't just believe the gospel; we become like the gospel in our lives. We reenact his dying and rising.
10. The “fellowship of his sufferings . . . and power of his resurrection” (the J-Curve) provides a missing grounding for love.

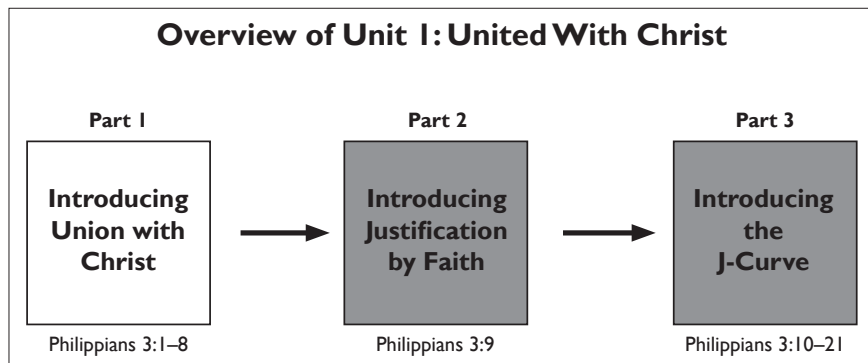


# PART 1: UNION WITH CHRIST

If going through the *J-Curve* study together is like building a house, we are digging the basement and laying the foundation in these first two sections. Without a strong foundation, the house won't be able to stand. Hopefully you will either see new truths or old truths in a fresh way.

Part 1, *Union with Christ*, shows how important to the apostle Paul is the idea that we are “in Jesus.” We discover how we are all “in” something. We also introduce additional key ideas for Paul: legalism and the Flesh.

*Video resources to help you teach this material are available at [SeeJesus.net/TeachJ-Curve](http://SeeJesus.net/TeachJ-Curve).*



# LESSON 1: IN THE FLESH

*Using Philippians 3, we begin by looking at the dark side of human nature. We reflect first on legalism, then on our Flesh's desire to create a source of life other than God. Understanding the Flesh is critical to understanding the gospel. Unless we see the depth and power of our sin, we won't appreciate the power of the gospel.*

## SECTION 1: The Legalist's Boast

15 mins

### Read Philippians 3:1-6

<sup>1</sup> Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. <sup>2</sup> Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. <sup>3</sup> For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and *boast*<sup>1</sup> in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—<sup>4</sup> though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

### Who is Paul warning the Philippians about in verse 2?

*Various answers. This will be answered more clearly in the Historical Background below. Ask them not to read ahead.*



### Historical Background: Judaizers

The people Paul warns about were called Judaizers. They were Jewish Christian missionaries, not approved by the Jerusalem Church, who wanted Gentile Christians to become Jews in practice by being circumcised.<sup>2</sup> In their view, Gentiles had to keep the law in order to be truly part of the people of God (see Gen. 17). Judaizers said that “Jesus + law obedience = salvation.”<sup>3</sup>

### 1. What do you think Paul is referring to when he says these people “mutilate the flesh”?

Paul is referring to the practice of circumcision. *Most will know this means removing the foreskin (a small piece of skin) from the male sexual organ.*

<sup>1</sup> I've changed the ESV *glory* to *boast* because it is a more literal translation, and *boasting* is a major theme in Paul that gets lost because the Greek word is translated as either *boast* (NIV), *glory* (ESV) or *rejoice*. See Thielman, *The NIV Application Commentary: Philippians*, 168.

<sup>2</sup> Summary by Dr. Kevin McFadden, personal note to the author.

<sup>3</sup> For a full explanation, see Tom Schreiner, *Circumcision* in Hawthorne, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*.



## Historical Background: Legalism

- Paul was not opposed to circumcision. Paul didn't care if someone was circumcised or uncircumcised (Gal. 6:15; 1 Cor. 7:19). He even circumcised Timothy so as to not offend Jewish believers since Timothy's mother was Jewish (Acts 16:3). What Paul was opposed to was circumcision as a requirement for justification or salvation (Gal. 5:2-4).<sup>4</sup>
- 1st century Judaism, like all legalism, was concerned for formal, outward purity that forgot about people. The Talmud tells us that "purity broke out in Israel" likely at this time.<sup>5</sup> Jesus recoils from the Pharisees' legalism, in particular their strict observance of the Sabbath that ignored the sick.<sup>6</sup>
- In legalism, the outer ritual and performance is all-important as opposed to inward change and deeper issues of the heart. For example, in the 1st century, mikvehs (pools for ritual cleansing) were everywhere in Israel, pointing to a renewed interest in outward purity. Jewish men would take frequent "baptisms" in mikvehs.



Entrance to a mikveh filled with water south of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. As you look at this historical background, what are some of the patterns of the Judaizers' approach to "goodness"?

Outer appearance, ritual impurity. "I have to do things exactly right."

### In legalism, what is the root problem—my heart or getting my behavior right?

Getting my behavior right. My heart is not corrupt. Therefore, I have it in my power to do the right thing, to change my behavior.

<sup>4</sup> Summary by Dr. Kevin McFadden.

<sup>5</sup> "Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 13b," Shanks, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 22. The Talmud is the Jewish "tradition of the elders," composed of the Mishnah (200 AD) and a commentary on the Mishnah (200-500 AD). Here's an example of this view of external purity: in the first century, most Jews believed that if you poured water from a pure vessel into an impure vessel, the water would become impure. The Community of Qumran taught that the impurity traveled up the stream of water from the impure vessel making the pure vessel impure as well! See Shanks, *Conversations*, 162.

<sup>6</sup> For an in-depth reflection, see Lesson Notes 1 and 2 in Appendix.

<sup>7</sup> Photo courtesy of Todd Bolen/BiblePlaces.com

## If my heart isn't bad, then how difficult is change?

Change is easy. I only need to make changes in my behavior, not in my heart. My problem is serious but solvable. *Notice how the solution fits the problem.*

### 3. How is reliance on ourselves a very modern solution to our problems?

*Teach what they don't say.*

Almost all modern psychology is an attempt to fix the broken self in its own strength by better thinking, habits, or environment. Modern psychology is all about getting the right view of ourselves in the right situation.



### 4. We look back on mikvehs and say “how odd,” but what modern efforts do we make at self-improvement? What do we obsess over?

*Teach what they don't say.*

Dieting, exercise, recycling. None of these is inherently bad, but we can make them the center of our life—the quest for a balanced, serene life. We are no different.

#### Summary of Observations on Legalism:

1. Legalism focuses on outward behavior and not the heart.
2. Legalism focuses on appearance, on outward purity instead of inward purity.
3. The legalist doesn't think he is that bad, so he is confident he can change himself.

**Definition of Legalism:** The law is good; in fact, it gives us a wise path to follow. But because of the Flesh's confident self-righteousness, we believe that we can both please ourselves and God by merely doing the right thing on our own. Then rules or “keeping the law” become a yardstick that show us (as well as God and others) how good we are. In other words, our Flesh corrupts the law. We lose sight of the heart of the law—love for God and neighbor—and put rules ahead of people.

## SECTION 2: Paul's Reaction to Boasting

5 mins

*Now let's look at Paul's reaction to this whole view of life.*

### 5. What three things does Paul call the Judaizers in verse 2?

Dogs, evildoers, those who mutilate the Flesh.



#### Literary Background: Paul's Warning

Each of the three words (dogs, evil, mutilate) begins with the “k” sound, adding to the punch. This is called alliteration. Paul is calling them the “kkk”! A translation closer to the feel of the Greek (3:2) reads:

Look out for those *dogs!* *kunas*

Look out for *evil workers!* *kakous*

Look out for the *mutilation!* *katatomen*



## What is Paul's tone in verse 2?

Passionate, emphatic, vigilant.

Reread 3:2 for emphasis.

## Does Paul seem a little extreme?

Various answers. Answer with Historical Background.



### Historical Background: Religious Terrorists

Paul looked at Judaizers the way we look at terrorists. How would you react if you were in the Boston airport on the morning of September 11, 2001, and realized terrorists were boarding the flight? Paul is doing exactly what we would do, except that he is more concerned for eternal life and the existence of the church than physical life. If Judaizers were not stopped, they would destroy Christianity by making it a Jewish ethnic sect.



### Literary Background: Paul's Warning

With each of the three names, Paul subtly calls the Judaizers pagans—the very people they despised. Paul is ironic, reversing what we are expecting. “Paul . . . is making a startling point: the great reversal brought in by Christ means that it is the Judaizers who must be regarded as Gentiles.”<sup>8</sup>

**1st: “Dogs” was a religious term.** “Dogs” was used throughout antiquity as a general insult similar to our word “lowlife” or “loser.” A “dog” was an unclean creature that ate scraps.<sup>9</sup>

**2nd: “Evil workers.”** The Judaizers thought of themselves as doing “good works” or what Paul calls in Romans and Galatians, “the works of the law.”

**3rd: “The mutilation” is a pun.** “Mutilation” (*katomē*) rhymes with “circumcision” (*peritomē*). Jews thought of themselves as “the circumcision.” So Paul is saying, “You call yourselves the circumcision, but in reality you are like Gentile “cutters, mutilating your body.” Pagans would often scar or mark their body.

## SECTION 3: Paul the Apostle's Boast

25 mins

*Paul the apostle now switches to the positive, “the church.”*

### 6. Read 3:3. Who is the “we” in 3:3? How does this reverse what the Judaizers thought?

“We are the circumcision” = Christians. The church is the *true* circumcision.

<sup>8</sup> Silva, *Philippians*, 147.

<sup>9</sup> Nanos, “Paul’s Reversal of Jews Calling Gentiles ‘Dogs’ (Philippians 3:2): 1600 Years of an Ideological Tale Wagging an Exegetical Dog?”, *Biblical Interpretation* 17 (2009), 460-469 especially. Only later did Jewish rabbis refer specifically to Gentiles as “dogs.”

## So, in effect, who are the true Jews?

Christians are the true Jews! According to Paul, Jews who don't believe in Jesus are not true Jews! Christians—not those who are only physical descendants—are the heirs of the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. See Romans 4:11-12.



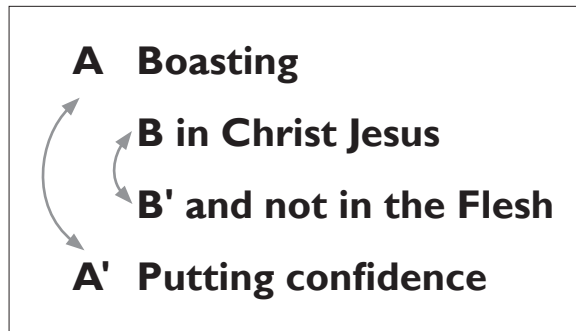
### Theological Background: Circumcision of the Heart

The Old Testament (Deut. 10:16, Jer. 4:4) tells us that Israel needs circumcision of the heart. Circumcision was an outward seal of acceptance into the covenant, but the Judaizers set themselves above uncircumcised Gentiles by turning the seal into a boast. Paul writes, “But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter” (Rom. 2:29).



### Literary Background: “Boast in Christ Jesus”<sup>10</sup>

“Boast in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” is written in an X-pattern.<sup>11</sup> Similar letters (A and A') indicate similar ideas. Here's how the Greek reads.



### 7. “Boasting in \_\_\_\_\_” and “confidence in \_\_\_\_\_” serve the same purpose. What does boasting or confidence in something do for us?

*Teach what they don't say.*

- “Reason to hold your head up.”
- “Why you get out of bed in the morning.”
- They are your foundation, the ground of who you are. Paul is talking about his identity.

### What phrase does Paul repeat three times in 3:3-4?

Confidence in the Flesh.



### 8. Let's list what Paul's Flesh is confident in before he met Jesus.

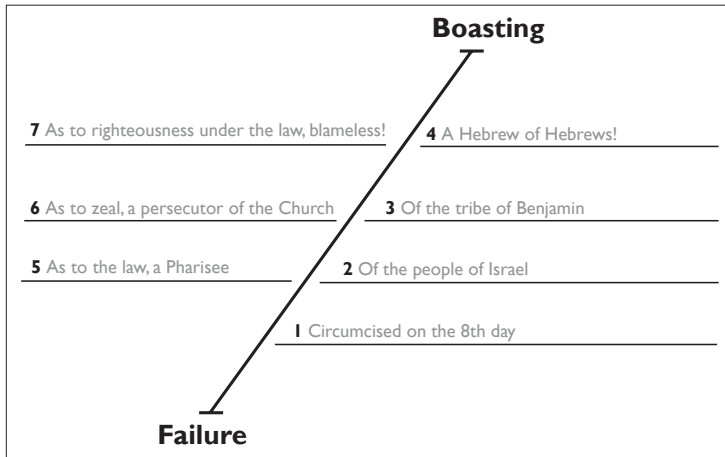
*Fill in the spaces next to #1-7 on the Failure-Boasting chart. None of this below is in the Participant's Manual.*

1. **Circumcision.**
2. **People of Israel.**

<sup>10</sup> The Greek word *boast* has a broader meaning than the more negative English word so it is translated as either *boast* (NIV), *glory* (ESV), or rejoice. I've used *boast* because it is a major theme in Paul's writings that can get lost. See Thielman, *Philippians*, 168, and Silva, *Philippians*, 147.

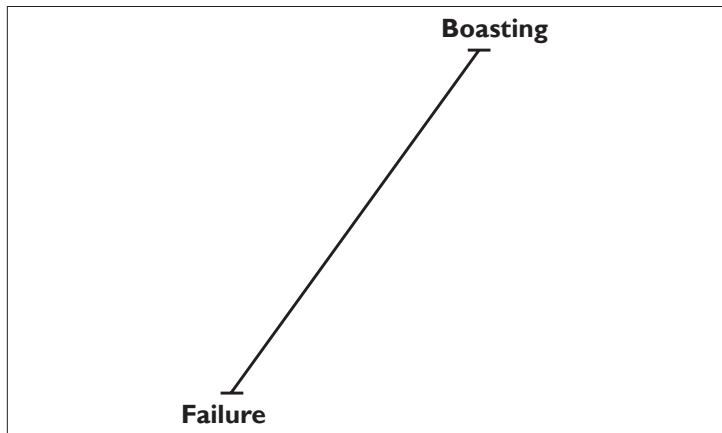
<sup>11</sup> O'Brien, *Philippians*, 363.

3. **Tribe of Benjamin.** What made Benjamin's tribe special? 1) It had Saul, Israel's first king. 2) Jerusalem was in its borders. 3) It was the warrior tribe that led Israel into battle (Judg. 5:14, Hos. 5:8). 4) It remained loyal to Judah when the kingdom divided.
4. **A Hebrew of Hebrews.** Paul is the best of the best.<sup>12</sup>
5. **Law: A Pharisee.** The Pharisees were the "separated ones," the religious elite.
6. **Zeal: persecutor of the church.** "Zeal" was code for a devout Jew who fought the enemies of God. Aaron's son Phineas was an example of zeal when he slayed an Israelite man who committed adultery with a Midianite woman (Num. 25:6-13, Ps. 106:30-31).<sup>13</sup>
7. **Under the law: blameless.**



**9. Let's construct our own chart similar to the apostle Paul's. Think of a personal boast you've either said or thought. I'll write them down.**

*Be ready with your own list to "prime the pump." A boast is something true that can easily become a "confidence in the Flesh." For example, "my daughter went to Harvard," "our son scored in the game," [when a politician loses:] "I thought he would lose."*



<sup>12</sup> Some commentators think Paul means, "I'm not one of those Hebrews who have adopted Greek ways." But the parallel passage in Gal. 1:14 suggests that Paul is simply saying he is a better Hebrew.

<sup>13</sup> See Ortlund, *Zeal Without Knowledge*, 150-165. Paul "was so deeply and passionately concerned about maintaining Jewish solidarity and adherence to Torah [law] that he would go to any length, even Phinechan-like violence, to snuff out perceived threats to such cherished loyalties" (154).

**There is a subtle difference between our list and Paul's. It reflects the kind of culture Paul is in. Can any of you see it?**

*Hint: What is the difference between Paul's first four and last three items? Challenging question.*

The last three (left side of chart) are Paul's personal achievements, but the first four items (right side of the chart) come from being a Jew. He didn't work at those.



**Historical Background: Shame-Honor Culture**

In a shame-honor culture (which was all of the ancient world) your primary identity is given at birth. Your family, birth order, tribe, and father's work determined your status. Identity was given, not earned. So the first four items belonged to Paul as the son of well-born Jewish parents. Paul was upper-class Judaism. He was highly educated in both the Greek academy and by Jewish rabbis.

**10. How do we see legalism in Paul's list of virtues? What is legalism focused on?**

- They are all outer things, appearance, how he looks.
- They are all things that Paul does.

**What does legalism always miss?**

- None of them touch Paul's heart, what he is like as a person.
- None have to do with love.

**By the way, has Paul stopped boasting now that he is a follower of Jesus?**

*If they say yes or aren't sure, then read 3:3.*

No, Paul hasn't stopped boasting. He has just changed his boast from himself and his performance to Jesus and Jesus' performance.

**SECTION 4: The Flesh**

**5 mins**

*The point of this question is to get them thinking about "the Flesh." Don't linger.*

**11. When Paul says "Flesh" in 3:3-4, what do you think he means?**

- Sometimes Paul means physical flesh; sometimes he means a condition of our hearts.
- Paul's list of seven items is an example of the Flesh.

**Based on Paul calling this list his "confidence in the flesh," what is the "Flesh"?**

Us on our own; us in our own strength.

*Accept various answers.*

## Definition of the Flesh

Paul the apostle uses “the Flesh” in several distinct ways. Most frequently, he uses “Flesh” to describe our sinful nature, our natural bent towards evil, which causes us to obsess over ourselves and rebel against God. These two aspects of the Flesh are connected: because we are allergic to God (we don’t want anyone telling us what to do), we are self-absorbed. We reverse the two great commandments. Instead of loving others, we love ourselves; instead of loving God, we love other gods. Our Flesh, at its core, is our determination to seek a source of life other than God, an alternative source of life. It is our belief that we can do life by our own power and effort.<sup>14</sup> (We capitalize “Flesh” when the apostle Paul uses it to describe our sinful nature.)<sup>15</sup>

Let’s reflect on the connection between legalism and the Flesh.

### 12. Why does the Flesh like legalism?

- The Flesh likes legalism because legalism makes goodness doable.
- Legalism says it is easy to be good. Just do these things.

### 13. Why doesn’t legalism work?

Our Flesh! Legalism denies that we are sinners, curved inward, always thinking about ourselves and how we look. Legalism presumes that we aren’t all that bad, that we can manage life on our own. But real change can only come from a changed heart.

### 14. What is the relationship between legalism and “the Flesh”?

*Challenging question. Teach what they don’t say.*

- Legalism is the measuring rod for having confidence in the Flesh. It encompasses the activities and standards that let you know how you are doing in relationship to an alternative source of life. Paul felt he was doing well.
- Legalism and the Flesh fit perfectly. If I’m not that bad, then following a few rules will make me good. A list of accomplishments, then, is relatively easy to do. The Flesh thinks it has everything under control.

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<sup>14</sup> To support idolatry at the core of the Flesh, see Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, 93-95. He connects “sin as idolatry” (Romans 1) with the Flesh: “‘flesh’ is the pregnant and very specific description of man in his sin” (95). “Calvin says that the Flesh is anything outside of Christ, anything that we do or trust in other than Christ” (Silva, *Philippians*, 149).

<sup>15</sup> Summary of Flesh by Kevin McFadden (PhD), personal communication with author. “As a devout Jew, Paul believed the world was created ‘good’ so our physical body, our flesh is good. But Paul also believed when Adam disobeyed God he plunged the human race into sin. Paul sometimes uses *flesh* to refer simply to human beings who live in bodies, but usually *flesh* is Paul’s way of describing human beings in our sinfulness, our bent towards evil. See Genesis 1:31, 1 Timothy 4:4 for physical creation is good. See Galatians 5:19-20, Romans 7:5,14,18, 8:4-13, 13:14 for Flesh as our bent towards evil.” See also Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 47-50.

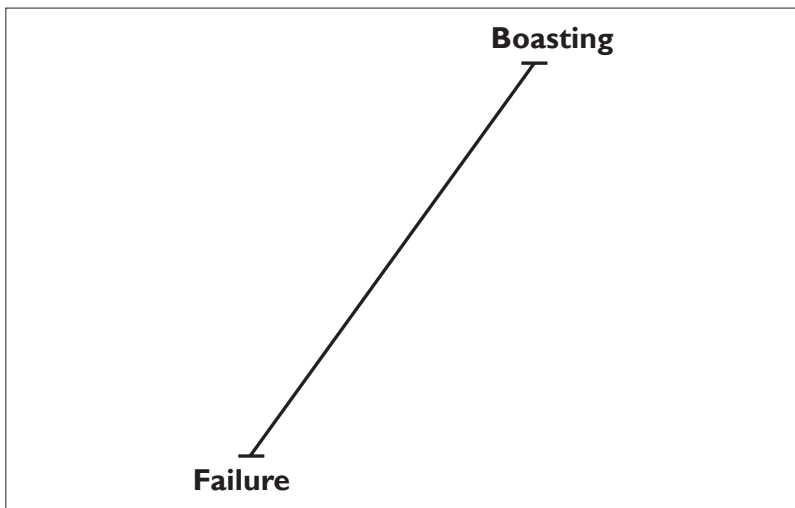
# LESSON 1 APPLICATION

## Reflecting on Legalism

1. Legalism makes the rule more important than people. Can you think of an example where you've seen legalism, where someone has a personal rule that forgets about people?
2. Can you think of an example in your life where you've had a personal rule that forgets about people?
3. What are forms of legalism in our modern culture—either secular or Christian?
  - *Political correctness is a form of legalism.*
  - *Christian fundamentalism is a form of legalism.*
4. Why are we so quick to become legalists?

## Reflect on the Failure-Boasting Chart

Construct your own Failure-Boasting Chart based on your personal boasts, either current ones or those that you've had in the past.



## Reflect on the Flesh

5. Based on this lesson, create your own personalized definition of the Flesh using the word "me." Share these with the group.

*Examples: "me on my own," "me thinking about me," "me at the center," "me filled up with me," "ugly me," "thinking about me, worrying about me—me all the time," "have you noticed me?"*

6. Can you think of one area of your life that might be an "alternative source of life"?

*Children, spouse, getting married, sexual fulfillment, country, job, career.*

