

Paul's Grid for Guarding the Gospel: Lessons from Galatians on Lordship Salvation

Distinguishing Hard and Soft Lordship Salvation in Light of Galatians

By Bob Nyberg

Introduction

The apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians is one of the clearest and most passionate defenses of the gospel of grace in the New Testament. Written to believers in the region of Galatia who were being influenced by false teaching, the letter pulls no punches. Paul moves quickly from his greeting to an expression of astonishment:

"I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel" (Gal. 1:6).

What follows in Galatians is a masterclass in how to guard the purity of the gospel — not only by clearly defining it, but also by addressing different kinds of threats with appropriate responses. Paul does not respond to every problem in the same way. He reserves his most severe language — an anathema — for those who pervert the terms of salvation. For others, whose errors compromised the gospel in practice or confused the Christian life after salvation, Paul used strong rebuke and corrective teaching, but without invoking an anathema curse.

This pattern in Galatians forms a kind of "grid" for evaluating gospel-related errors today. In particular, it helps us distinguish between two forms of Lordship Salvation: ***Hard Lordship***, which both frontloads and backloads the gospel, and ***Soft Lordship***, which avoids frontloading the gospel of grace with works. Nevertheless, it still backloads salvation with obligations of performance thus effectively undermining assurance of salvation. Both distort grace, but not at the same level of seriousness. Hard Lordship changes the very terms of salvation; Soft Lordship leaves the front door open but confuses believers about their standing before God.

Before defining these two positions and applying Paul's grid, we need to understand the three distinct problems Paul confronted in Galatia and how he responded to each.

The Problems Paul Confronted in Galatia

Paul's letter addresses at least three distinct issues in Galatia, each requiring a different pastoral response. These range from direct gospel perversion to practical compromise to post-salvation legalism.

The Judaizers – Gospel Perversion (Gal. 1:6–9)

The Judaizers were teaching that Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses to be saved (Acts 15:1, 5). This was not merely a difference of emphasis — it was a fundamentally different gospel. They had ***frontloaded*** the gospel by adding human works as conditions for justification.

Paul's response was immediate and severe:

"If anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:9).

This was not a matter for debate or dialogue. Adding works to the front of the gospel shuts the door of salvation to the lost. For such distortion, Paul pronounced an anathema — the strongest form of condemnation.

Peter – Gospel Compromise (Gal. 2:11–14)

Later, Paul recounts a confrontation with Peter in Antioch. Initially, Peter freely ate with Gentile believers. But when certain men came from James, Peter withdrew, fearing criticism from the circumcision party. His withdrawal implied that Gentiles were second-class unless they adopted Jewish customs.

Peter's behavior did not frontload the gospel — he still believed in salvation by grace through faith — but his actions **backloaded** acceptance onto cultural conformity. This compromised the truth of the gospel in practice.

Paul's response was sharp and public:

“I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed” (Gal. 2:11).

Here there was no anathema. Peter's failure was serious and influential, but it did not change the terms of salvation. It required rebuke, not a curse.

The Galatian Believers – Gospel Confusion (Gal. 3:1–3)

The Galatian believers themselves had started well, trusting Christ alone for salvation. But they were being “bewitched” into thinking they could be perfected through law-keeping. They were not trying to get saved by works; rather, they were attempting to grow spiritually by fleshly effort — a classic case of legalism in sanctification.

Paul's tone is still strong:

“Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?” (Gal. 3:3).

Yet even here, Paul does not question their salvation or pronounce a curse. Instead, he applies corrective teaching to bring them back to grace-based living.

Key Takeaway: Paul's response is proportionate to the nature of the error. A false gospel that changes the entry point to salvation (frontloading) receives an anathema. A compromised gospel in practice (backloading) receives rebuke. Legalism in sanctification receives correction. This same grid can help us evaluate modern distortions of the gospel, including Hard and Soft Lordship Salvation.

Defining and Contrasting Hard and Soft Lordship Salvation

Before applying Paul's “Galatians grid” to modern teaching, we need to define what we mean by *Hard* and *Soft* Lordship Salvation. While both positions affirm that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ, they differ in how they frame the relationship between faith, works, and assurance — and both differ from the biblical Free Grace position.

Hard Lordship Salvation – Frontloading and Backloading

Hard Lordship Salvation explicitly **frontloads** the gospel by requiring works or commitments before one can be saved. A typical form of this teaching says that a person must “submit to Christ's lordship,” “turn from all sin,” or “surrender every area of life” as part of the condition for receiving eternal life. Faith is redefined to include personal resolve, obedience, or turning from sin, shifting the object of faith from Christ's finished work to the sinner's own promises.

Hard Lordship also **backloads** the gospel by making post-salvation works a necessary proof of genuine faith. The believer's eternal destiny is called into question if his or her life does not

produce a certain level of obedience or perseverance. This not only frontloads the gospel but also places assurance on a lifetime of performance, leaving no room for settled confidence in God's promise alone.

In Paul's Galatians grid, Hard Lordship is closest to the Judaizers in chapter 1. Like them, it changes the terms of the gospel at the front door, barring the lost from salvation unless they add works to faith. This is why, if Paul were alive today, we would expect him to pronounce an *anathema* against such teaching.

Soft Lordship Salvation – Backloading Without Frontloading

Soft Lordship Salvation avoids frontloading language. It typically presents salvation as a gift received by faith alone in Christ alone. However, it still **backloads** assurance onto performance. Believers are often told that the only reliable proof of their salvation is a pattern of good works, ongoing faithfulness, or perseverance to the end. If these signs are lacking, they are told they may have “false faith” or were “never truly saved.”

While this form of Lordship Salvation does not bar the lost from salvation at the outset, it confuses the saved about their standing before God. Assurance is no longer based on Christ's promise but on one's own track record. This undermines joy, promotes unhealthy introspection, and can stunt spiritual growth.

In Paul's Galatians grid, Soft Lordship parallels Peter's compromise in chapter 2 and the Galatian believers' confusion in chapter 3. The door of salvation remains open, but the practical message undercuts the believer's ability to rest in grace. Paul would not pronounce an *anathema* here — but he would issue a firm rebuke and corrective teaching.

Why the Distinction Matters

Some may argue that the difference between Hard and Soft Lordship Salvation is minor since both link works to salvation in some way. But the distinction is important:

- Hard Lordship changes the terms of salvation itself (a Galatians 1 problem).
- Soft Lordship changes the terms of assurance and sanctification (a Galatians 2–3 problem).

Both are damaging, but they are not equally damaging. Paul's pattern shows that our response should be proportionate: *anathema* for a false gospel that blocks the way of salvation, rebuke and correction for a confused gospel that undermines grace in the Christian life.

The Anathema vs. Rebuke Principle

Paul's handling of the Galatian controversies reveals a principle that is both simple and profound: The severity of the response should match the severity of the error. In matters of the gospel, the most severe error is any alteration of the way of salvation itself. Errors that compromise the gospel in practice or confuse the believer's walk are still serious but require a different level of response.

Anathema for Frontloading the Gospel

When the Judaizers added circumcision and law-keeping to faith in Christ, they created a “different gospel” (Gal. 1:6–9). This was not a secondary disagreement; it was a fundamental shift in the basis of salvation. Paul's response — to pronounce an *anathema* — demonstrates that

when the message of salvation is altered at its entry point, souls are eternally endangered. Such a distortion must be confronted with the highest level of warning and separation.

Applied today, Hard Lordship Salvation belongs in this category. By frontloading works, commitment, or surrender into the definition of saving faith, it changes the very terms by which eternal life is received. Even if the error is clothed in biblical language, its effect is the same as the Judaizers' teaching: it bars the door of salvation to the lost. Following Paul's example, such teaching should not be tolerated, partnered with, or treated as a minor difference — it is an anathema-level threat to the gospel.

Rebuke and Correction for Backloading the Gospel

When Peter withdrew from eating with Gentile believers (Gal. 2:11–14) or when the Galatians tried to be “perfected by the flesh” (Gal. 3:3), the issue was not the entrance to salvation but the experience of the Christian life afterward. These errors undermined grace in practice, promoted division, and led to spiritual bondage, but they did not add works as a condition for justification.

Applied today, Soft Lordship Salvation fits here. It does not demand works at the front door, but it shifts the ground of assurance from God's promise to human performance. Believers may still be saved, but they are robbed of joy and hindered in spiritual growth. Paul's pattern in Galatians shows that such error calls for firm rebuke and careful correction, not a curse.

Why This Distinction Matters for Ministry

Understanding this principle helps pastors, teachers, and churches respond biblically to different gospel-related errors:

- It prevents overreaction — treating every disagreement as if it were a Galatians 1 heresy.
- It prevents underreaction — treating genuine gospel perversions as if they were minor issues.
- It maintains the proper balance of truth and grace in dealing with brothers and sisters in Christ who may be confused but not apostate.

In short, Hard Lordship deserves the severity of Galatians 1, Soft Lordship the rebuke of Galatians 2–3. Both need to be confronted, but not in the same way.

The Free Grace Remedy

While Hard and Soft Lordship Salvation differ in seriousness, both share a common flaw: they shift the believer's focus from Christ's finished work to human performance. Hard Lordship makes performance a requirement for salvation; Soft Lordship makes performance the test of salvation. The antidote to both is the same — a return to the biblical, Free Grace gospel that Paul proclaimed and defended.

The Gospel: Faith Alone in Christ Alone

The gospel message is simple, clear, and unchanging: eternal life is a free gift from God, received by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, apart from works (John 3:16; 5:24; Eph. 2:8–9; Titus 3:5). Faith is not a promise to perform, a pledge of obedience, or a turning from sin. It is taking Jesus at His word, trusting Him and His substitutionary death for the gift He offers.

Paul summarized it plainly:

“Now to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness” (Rom. 4:5, NASB95).

This definition leaves no room for frontloading requirements or backloading conditions. The moment a sinner believes in Christ, he or she is justified, sealed by the Holy Spirit, and guaranteed eternal life.

Assurance Based on God’s Promise, Not Our Performance

Free Grace theology teaches that assurance flows from the unchanging promises of God, not from the changing record of human works. The apostle John wrote,

“These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 Jn. 5:13, NASB95).

If salvation is a free gift, then assurance must be based on the Giver’s guarantee, not the recipient’s performance. Works can be evidence of growth and fellowship, but they are never the basis of knowing we have eternal life. This truth dismantles the performance-based anxiety fostered by both forms of Lordship Salvation.

Works in the Christian Life: Important but Not Foundational

Free Grace does not deny the importance of works. Good works are the intended result of salvation, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and will be rewarded at the Judgment Seat of Christ (Eph. 2:10; Titus 3:8; 2 Cor. 5:10). They serve as a testimony to others and bring glory to God. But they are the *fruit* of salvation, not the *root*.

In the Free Grace framework:

- Works are the believer’s reasonable service, not the sinner’s entry fee.
- Perseverance in good works affects reward and fellowship, not eternal destiny.

How Free Grace Addresses Hard and Soft Lordship Salvation

Against Hard Lordship Salvation: It refuses to add works or commitments to the front door of salvation, keeping the gospel message as Paul preached it — by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Against Soft Lordship Salvation: It anchors assurance in God’s promise, not the believer’s performance, thus freeing Christians from the fear that a lapse in obedience calls their salvation into question.

By restoring both the freeness of the gospel and the certainty of assurance, Free Grace theology preserves the joy and motivation for godly living that comes from gratitude, not fear.

Summary & Conclusion

Paul’s letter to the Galatians offers a timeless “grid” for detecting and rejecting distortions of the gospel. His sharp confrontation with frontloading legalists (Gal. 1:6–9) and his refusal to tolerate backloading requirements (Gal. 2:4–5; 3:1–3) provide a double safeguard. Hard Lordship Salvation violates the gospel on both fronts—placing the burden of discipleship on the sinner *before* salvation and tying the certainty of salvation to performance *after* salvation. Soft Lordship Salvation avoids frontloading but still corrupts the message by making the believer’s perseverance in good works a necessary test of salvation. Both approaches undermine grace,

shift the focus from Christ's finished work to human effort, and rob believers of the assurance Paul insists upon (Gal. 2:16; 5:1).

The Free Grace position stands in harmony with Paul's gospel: salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone—apart from works before, during, or after the moment of faith. Good works have their place as the proper fruit of salvation (Gal. 5:13–14), but they never form the root or proof of eternal life. Paul's example shows that protecting the gospel requires both doctrinal clarity and pastoral courage. In every generation, the church must guard against both frontloaded demands that prevent the lost from believing and backloaded conditions that keep the saved from resting in Christ. Galatians reminds us that any message which adds to faith alone in Christ alone is “a different gospel” (Gal. 1:6–7) and therefore no gospel at all. Our task is not to improve Paul's gospel but to guard it—proclaiming the free grace of God without compromise, and rejoicing in the liberty that is ours in Christ.