

“The Gospel of Christ”

The First in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians

Texts: Galatians 1:1-9; Genesis 4:1-16

With good reason, the Book of Galatians has been called the *magna carte* of Christian liberty. There is perhaps no portion of Holy Scripture which packs the punch of Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia. In this letter Paul sets out what is perhaps the most passionate defense of the gospel found in all the New Testament. The apostle is angry when he writes this letter—he calls the Galatians “foolish” (3:1) and even tells them if they want to begin with circumcision, they might as well to go the whole way and emasculate themselves (5:12). Strong words from the apostle, but much is at stake.

The church to which Paul is writing is one which he himself helped to found not long before. This same church was now tolerating, if not openly embracing, a form of teaching which directly contradicts what the apostle previously taught them about the saving work of Jesus Christ. For Paul, this is a spiritual battle to be fought over the meaning of the gospel. He is fighting for the very soul of these churches. He minces no words with those whom he regards as enemies of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Before we work our way through this letter, it is necessary take a look at the historical background which led to its composition. Paul’s circular letter to the churches in Galatia (a region located in what is now south-central Turkey) and was written in AD 48, just prior to the Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15:1-21.¹ By looking at Paul’s comments here in light of events recounted in the Book of Acts, we know that Paul visited the southern part of Galatia at least twice during the missionary journey described in Acts 14:21. In Galatians 2, Paul describes his visit to Jerusalem on the occasion of a great famine which hit the city as described in Acts 11:27-30. In Galatians 4:13, Paul refers to having preached the gospel to the Galatians previously.

This indicates that Galatians was written in the days preceding the Jerusalem Council, when the pressing question of Gentile conformity to the Law of Moses was hotly debated before being definitively settled by the leaders of the church. The pressing question was “must Gentile believers in Jesus live like Jews in order to be faithful Christians?” These circumstances provide compelling evidence that Galatians is Paul’s earliest letter included in the canon of the New Testament, and the doctrine of justification is the basic gospel message Paul proclaimed from the very beginning of his ministry as apostle to the Gentiles.

As a result of Jewish opposition to Paul’s proclamation of Christ crucified in the synagogues of the region, Paul and Barnabas turned to preaching to the Gentiles. Many were converted. Soon after Paul and Barnabas left Galatia, Jewish converts to Christianity began teaching in the churches that Gentile converts must submit to the Law of Moses and undergo circumcision in order to be regarded as “right before God” (justified). In Galatians 1:7, Paul refers to unnamed individuals who he says were throwing the Galatians into confusion soon after he had departed the area.

Known to us as the Judaizers, these false teachers were undermining Paul’s gospel by claiming that his

¹ For a helpful discussion of the issues surrounding the date and composition of this letter see: D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), pp. 289-303; and F. F. Bruce, *Paul: The Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 173-187.

preaching was actually dangerous since it did not require obedience to the law of God as a condition of deliverance from the wrath of God. Furthermore, they claimed, Paul's authority was inferior to that of other apostles such as Peter and James, who were more closely associated with Jesus, the Jerusalem church, and with Judaism (1:1; 6:17).

The Judaizers were not denying that a Christian must trust in the death of Christ in order to be delivered from the wrath of God which is to come. These false teachers were much more subtle than that. To their way of thinking, the death of Christ was necessary for salvation because it removed the guilt of past sin. But the Judaizers also believed that faith in Jesus Christ is not sufficient to render one as "righteous" before God. A Gentile convert must add to their faith in Jesus as Messiah, the so-called "badges" or "emblems" of national Israel. These badges were circumcision, the keeping of certain dietary laws, the celebration of Jewish feasts, and understanding continuing obedience to the Law of Moses as essential in order to maintain one's place in the covenant community. This is known as covenantal nomism.

In other words, Gentile believers were required to believe in Jesus but then live as Jews. In Galatians 4:10, Paul mentions that the false teachers were instructing their converts to observe the feast days. As a result, Paul says, such people "*desire to be under law*" (Galatians 4:21). The sad conclusion is they are trying to be justified by commandment keeping. This is an impossibility with eternal consequences.

This same group of false teachers is very likely represented at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1 ff) by those whom Luke describes as men who came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "*unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.*" In their misguided zeal to preserve the traditions of their fathers, these false teachers were raising a very serious challenge to the gospel through their insistence that Gentile converts must not only become followers of Jesus, as they had, but must also submit to ritual circumcision in order to be regarded as righteous before God. Paul responds to these false teachers with what can only be described as righteous anger.

Paul's righteous anger stems from the fact that previously he had helped to found these churches by preaching Christ crucified throughout the area (3:1), though it was his own illness and time spent in the area recuperating, which had providentially made this possible (4:13). The Galatians, many of whom were Gentiles (4:8), had warmly welcomed Paul during his first visit (4:14-15). But now many of these same people had been deceived by those whom Paul describes as those who "*trouble you*" and as those "*who unsettle you*" (1:7; 5:12). They had come into Galatia from elsewhere, looking to add new converts to their movement all the while boasting about the "flesh" of their converts (6:13). "Paul's intention is to rescue his Galatian congregations from falling from grace (5:4), a possibility that causes him deep personal anguish (3:1; 4:19; 5:12)."² It is difficult to imagine a sterner rebuke to a group of churches, than Paul's Epistle to the Galatians.

The Epistle to the Galatians begins very abruptly, without the usual friendly greetings that characterize Paul's other epistles. In the opening verses of Galatians, Paul does not send greetings nor indulge in unnecessary small talk. The gospel is at stake. Paul gets right to the point in verses 1-2. "*Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the brothers who are with me, To the churches of Galatia:*"

It is not an accident that Paul begins this letter of rebuke by appealing to his own authority as an apostle.

² Thielman, Paul and the Law, 120.

An apostle is one personally called by Jesus and directly commissioned for a specific purpose, namely the preaching of the gospel (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:17). Because Paul has been called to this office by none other than Jesus himself, Paul teaches with the Lord's own authority. He preaches the same gospel that Jesus commissioned him to preach. This is something the false teachers cannot claim and this divinely-given authority is the basis for Paul's rebuke of those who have departed from his teaching.

While there is no hint of apostolic succession taught in the New Testament (as the apostles die off, they do not replace themselves with new apostles, but with ministers, elders, and deacons) the New Testament does clearly teach the principle of historical succession. That is, the doctrine taught by those apostles commissioned directly by Jesus Christ to preach and teach his people, will endure in Christ's church to the end of the age. Christ's teaching will be passed on to successive generations of Christians, even if only through a small remnant who remain faithful. It was our Lord himself who declared, "*the gates of hell shall not prevail against*" my church (Matthew 16:18). The opponents of Paul who have departed from his teaching will find themselves opposing not only Paul in the full authority of his apostolic office to the Gentiles, but they oppose Jesus who is anything but an absentee landlord of his church.

The fact that Paul was an apostle meant that this call and his teaching about Jesus Christ did not come from his own imagination or ambitions. His gospel was not a human invention. Rather, his gospel was revealed to him by none other than the Lord of the church. In mentioning the resurrection here, as he does, Paul is making it clear that he was appointed by the risen and glorified Lord who had appeared to all of the other disciples as well. There is absolutely no hint anywhere in the New Testament that Paul was a dissatisfied Jew seeking something more. His conversion is consistently presented throughout the Book of Acts (especially Acts 9) as dramatic and sudden, growing directly from his encounter with the Risen and Ascended Jesus while Paul was on his way to Damascus to hunt down and arrest Christians.

Calvin aptly describes this event, when he contends that God not only turned a wolf (Saul of Tarsus) into a sheep (Paul), he also turned this particular sheep into a shepherd—the apostle to the Gentiles.³ Paul makes frequent reference to the fact that while a distinct "ministry to Jews is certainly included in [his] call (see Acts 9:15), Paul will repeatedly emphasize in his letters that his call was particularly a call to preach to Gentiles" (Galatians 1:16; 1 Thess. 2:4; Romans 1:1, 5; 15:15-16).⁴

In verses 3-5, Paul extends a brief apostolic blessing to these churches he has helped to found. "*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.*" Paul connects the blessing given in the name of Christ to the redemption that Jesus Christ has accomplished for us. The same Jesus Christ who sends his greetings to the Galatians is the one who gave himself for our sins upon Calvary's cross. This is what we speak of as Christ's passive obedience. Jesus laid down his life for his sheep, it was not taken from him against his will (John 10:11). Jesus did this, Paul says, not to rescue us from temporal danger, such as the violence that Paul had experienced at the hands of both Jew and Gentiles, who rejected the gospel that he was proclaiming. Rather, Jesus gave himself up to deliver us from the powers of this present evil age.

Like our Lord, Paul sees the course of human history as comprised of two distinct ages: "this present

³ Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1, 256.

⁴ D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1992), 219.

age,” which stands in marked contrast to that which he calls “the age to come.” In every case in the New Testament, “this age” is described as evil and in temporal terms. It is the present period of time destined to end at the return of our Lord. “This age” stands in marked contrast to the “age to come,” which is characterized throughout the New Testament as an age of resurrection life, i.e. things eternal. “This age” is that period of time which precedes the coming of the Lord. It is an evil age dominated by worldly wisdom and philosophical speculation (1 Cor. 1:20), while Satan blinds the minds of those apart from Christ (2 Cor. 4:4). It is also an age dominated by those who think that human merit is the basis for our entrance into heaven. It is an age where people mistakenly embrace the religion typical of modern America: good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell. No one, of course, regards themselves as a “bad person,” which explains why so many who claim to believe in hell have no fear of going there.

This way of thinking is found in the Old Testament (Genesis 4:1-16—our Old Testament lesson). Cain’s offering from the soil (the work of his own hands) is an attempt to earn favor with God, and is typical of the sinful religious mindset of those who suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). For Paul, this present evil age is perhaps best characterized by our bondage to sin, now brought to light by the Law of God (cf. Romans 7:7-8). The false teachers who now trouble the Galatians are clearly theologians of “this age,” basing their hopes *not* upon the finished work of Christ and his imputed righteousness received by faith alone, but instead upon the supposed merit of good works and human righteousness.

Not mincing any words, Paul gets right to his point in verses 6-9. *“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.”* Paul is shocked by both the gravity of the error, and at the speed at which the Galatians were so favorably responding to a false gospel.

Paul not been gone from the region very long, but the fruit of Satanic deception is now present in these very churches where Paul had been so warmly and recently received just months earlier. Paul will recount in Galatians 2 that even Peter and Barnabas had been taken in by these false teachers (2:11-13). It did not take long for the false teachers to gain many converts—the reason for his amazement. This should not really surprise us, because people love darkness rather than light (cf. John 3:19).

Paul describes those Galatians who embraced this false teaching as *those “quickly deserting him who called you,”* that is, deserting Christ. Paul uses a term indicating desertion from one’s post in a military sense, or a revolt in the political sense. The word conveys the idea of a change in religion or philosophy.⁵ These false teachers have not improved upon the gospel, nor have they merely modified it for a specific cultural context. By changing or modifying the gospel in the slightest which Paul had previously taught them, Paul says, they have deserted Christ himself. They are turncoats and traitors.

The doctrine of divine calling plays an important role in Paul’s theology.⁶ Paul’s main line of argument throughout Galatians refutes the false teaching that we can be justified by works of the law (our obedience), while at the same time, affirms the fact that all both Jew and Gentile are *called* through that

⁵ Cf. the discussions in Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians*, 80, and; Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 43-44.

⁶ Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, 235-236.

same gospel to be members of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, the New Israel of God, a phrase which Paul applies to the church in Galatians 6:16.

Just as Israel was *called* to return to the promised land at the time of return from exile, so too, Jew and Gentiles throughout Galatia have been *called* through the proclamation of Christ crucified.⁷ The church as the “New Israel” is a prominent theme throughout Galatians, as seen in several important echoes from the Old Testament.⁸ The language of a new exodus is used throughout the letter. This is why Paul could express his shock that the Judaizers were re-enacting the events of Exodus 32—Israel’s apostasy soon after YHWH gave his people the law. Why would the Galatians place themselves in such peril?⁹

If the Judaizers succeed in Galatia, they will re-enslave the very people for whom Christ died to set free. Just as disobedient Israel was taken into captivity by falling under God’s judgment, so too, the Judaizers and those who follow them, also risk coming under God’s judgment. The fact that Jew and Gentile were both called through the gospel of Jesus Christ means that a new age in redemptive history has dawned. The Judaizers do not represent the faithful defenders of Israel as they claim. Ironically, they must be regarded as apostates from the true Israel, the church of Jesus Christ. This was a hard message to hear and a bitter pill to swallow, but helps to explain why Jews so often opposed Paul’s efforts at evangelism.

By teaching a gospel different from that which he had taught, the Judaizers were teaching what Paul calls a “different gospel,” a gospel which is “no gospel,” at all. There is only one gospel—the Gospel of Christ. It is defined in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 in terms of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection, and elsewhere in terms of justification (being reckoned as righteous), as in Romans 1:16-17, where the gospel is the power of God, and in it, the righteousness of God is revealed. It is crystal clear that for Paul, the very essence of the gospel is the doing and dying of Jesus Christ (Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection according to the Scriptures). That doing and dying of Jesus Christ is the power of God unto salvation.

As such, the term “gospel” refers to Christ’s historical work to provide for the salvation of sinners, both in his fulfilling of all righteousness and his death for our sins. The gospel is objective. That is, it is anchored in human history, in those things that Christ has done for us in time and space, which is “outside of ourselves,” as Luther once put it. The gospel is not what the Holy Spirit is doing *in* us—it is what God has done *for* us and which the Holy Spirit applies *to* us (cf. Ephesians 1:3-14). To turn the gospel into anything else is to deny the gospel altogether. A different gospel is no gospel at all.

Paul even says the false teachers have perverted the gospel, a term which is in the aorist tense, meaning a complete and thorough change was made in the content of what was preached. Paul’s gospel has been mutated and transformed by the Judaizers into something completely different, “another gospel,” which is “no gospel.” This is why the true gospel is said to be “of Christ,” because the gospel is about Christ’s work in history to save us from our sins. It was revealed to Paul by Jesus himself.

The content of what is preached (the gospel as revealed by Jesus to Paul) does not depend on the reputation or the abilities of the messenger who proclaims it. Paul says that even if an angel from heaven comes and preaches something other than what Paul had already preached to them, the angel is to be

⁷ Thielman, Paul and the Law, 135.

⁸ Thielman, Paul and the Law, 135 ff

⁹ Thielman, Paul and the Law, 136.

anathematized! As only he can, Luther once stated: “that which does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even if Peter and Paul be the teachers. On the other hand, that which does teach Christ is apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate or Herod should propound it.”¹⁰ As we will soon discover, Paul is even forced to confront Peter to his face, because when Peter gets caught with the smell of pork on his breath, he gives in to the pressure of the Judaizers. Paul must correct him because, as he says, the very gospel is at stake.

In his condemnation of those preaching this different gospel, Paul uses the term “*anathema*,” which means to be accursed or dedicated for destruction. To put in plain language, Paul is saying if anyone preaches to you a gospel other than what I preached, they will fall under God’s curse! This is no slight thing, and this warning comes with the full authority of Paul’s office as the apostle to the Gentiles, that is, with the authority of Jesus himself.

Paul’s warnings to the Galatians should ring in our ears today. If a false gospel could arise and be so widely accepted almost immediately after Paul and Barnabas had preached to the Galatians in person—to the extent that even Peter and Barnabas could be taken in for a time—this should warn us not to be surprised that evangelical and Reformed leaders can and do fall from grace and begin teaching another gospel, as we have sadly witnessed too many times in our own age. Sad to say, we should expect this to happen. We must always be on our guard for those who teach that the death of Christ is not enough to save us from God’s wrath in the judgment yet to come. The false gospel—that we are saved by Christ plus something we do—makes a great deal of sense to Americans who think that religion in general and Christianity in particular, is primarily about ethics, and that sound doctrine is not really all that important.

If someone believes that Christianity is essentially about making bad people into good people, or making good people into better people, Paul’s stress upon Christ crucified for sinners, will sound odd, even offensive. The biblical writers tell us that the cross is foolishness to the Greek and a stumbling block to the Jew. It is both to modern Americans. The American religion is the religion of Cain—do what seems right to you. We see it in the sentiment that people are basically good and fully capable of coming up with something on their own which they think is acceptable to God. “All that God wants is our best,” is Cain’s motto. No, what God demands of us under the law—perfect obedience—he freely grants to us in the gospel, good news of the death, resurrection, and obedience of Jesus, for us and in our place.

There will always be those in our midst urging us to soften the offense of the cross, or perhaps, to remove it all together. Given Paul’s view of sin (“*there is no one who seeks God*”—Romans 3:11), it is important to remind ourselves that it is God who seeks sinners. It is through the proclamation of the gospel, and only through the proclamation of that gospel, that God calls men and women to faith in his Son. We must never even entertain the thought of changing or softening our gospel, lest our gospel become no gospel at all and we fall under Paul’s anathema.

It is also clear from Paul’s argument that the issue here is the content of what is preached, not the reputation or the abilities of the preacher. A preacher’s credentials should have nothing to do with how charismatic or compelling he may be, but with whether or not he preaches the gospel faithfully. Faithfulness to the gospel is the standard by which a minister of word and sacrament in Christ’s church will be judged by the Lord of the church. Granted, there is no excuse for boring preaching. Nor is there any excuse for preaching which is poorly organized, confusing, and difficult to understand, or otherwise not compelling. In an entertainment-based social media driven culture such as ours, we have been

¹⁰ Luther, “Preface to the Epistle of James,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 7, 384 ff.

trained from infancy to evaluate things by how they make us feel, or by how they hold our diminished attention spans, or even worse, by whether or not we are entertained. This is not a good thing.

Paul lost so much ground so quickly because, by his own admission, the Judaizers were more charismatic and entertaining than he. They were willing to preach what people wanted and expect to hear—the message that God only wants our best efforts. They could even provide a list of things to do. We are all capable of doing our best—at least once in a while. Given our present context, we are especially vulnerable to the deception of those who Paul calls the silver-tongued super-apostles (cf. 2 Corinthians 11), and who will captivate us, motivate us, excite us, and then steal our souls.

The temptation is always great to tolerate a false gospel in which it is taught that our justification stems, in part, from the merit of human works, or the performance of religious rituals even if no today insists upon circumcision as necessary for justification. Many of our contemporaries still view this matter through the lens of Cain—how can we condemn someone who sincerely tries their best? Even Christians will tell us that doctrine doesn't matter all that much, and that what really matters is love and unity, so that we must embrace anyone and everyone who claims to be a Christian, in spite of their teaching about justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone. We witness this today when people tell us that the Protestant Reformation is over and that we should end our 450+ year dispute with Rome about the gospel for the sake of joint co-operation in the culture wars, and third world-evangelism. But then, how do we evangelize without an evangel? A different gospel is no gospel according to Paul.

Let us weigh carefully the ramifications of the true gospel and what is lost if we capitulate to modern Judaizers. Paul's gospel teaches us that Jesus Christ has died for all of our sins (past, present and future), and that the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ is imputed to us through faith alone received as a free gift. If Paul's gospel is the true gospel, it means that a sinner such as I can actually go to heaven, since when I measure myself by the Ten Commandments, I know that I have not the slightest chance of earning enough merit, or possessing enough good works to stand in God's presence. Paul's gospel means that every sinner who trusts in Jesus Christ alone can know that their sins are forgiven and that they are headed for heaven when they die.

Paul's gospel is everything. It teaches us that if we are trusting in Christ Jesus, his death avails for our sins—his blood washes the guilt of our sins away—and that his perfect obedience is reckoned as our own. This is the only way for sinful men and women to stand before the Holy God in the judgment yet to come.

It would figure that this would be the place where Satan would direct his attacks—rarely in frontal assaults, more often in subtle re-definition. For the gospel as taught by Paul is “all of Christ.” But Satan will find a way to make it “some of Christ and some of me.” For a gospel that is “some of Christ and some of me,” is a different gospel from that which Paul taught, and tragically, is no gospel at all.

This is why we must always be willing to fight for the gospel. If we lose the gospel, we have lost everything. But if we have the gospel we have everything we need for our only comfort in life and in death. For in the gospel of Christ, we have Jesus and all his saving merits. What else could we possibly need?