

Galatians 1:1-12

Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— 2 and all the members of God’s family who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— 7 not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! 9 As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

10 Am I now seeking human approval, or God’s approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

11 For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; 12 for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

CONTROVERSY

The church at Galatia was embroiled in controversy. Some teachers in that church said that you had to become a Jew before you could become a Christian.

But, Paul said this was not necessary. Christianity was not a new form of Judaism. Performing certain religious rites does not save us. Doing good deeds does not save us.

No, with the coming of Jesus it is a whole new ball game, a whole new world. In Jesus we learn that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works.

But, many of the teachers at Galatia were not so sure about this gospel. They thought that it needed to be supplemented by something more.

People had to do something. People had to make a commitment to the Jewish faith before they could make a commitment to Jesus. Salvation by grace through faith sounded too easy.

PAUL'S CALL

And so Paul begins his letter by referring to his own call.

You know the story. Paul did not want to be an apostle of Jesus Christ. He wanted to persecute those who followed Jesus. But, on the Damascus road Paul's plans were interrupted by God's plans. The risen Christ turned Paul around and sent him in a new direction.

Paul said, "I'm not doing this because I wanted to do it. No human being authorized me to do this job. The risen Christ turned me inside out and upside down. And now I'm working with the very people that I used to persecute. Instead of promoting orthodox Jewish faith I am now promoting the Way of Jesus."

ADDING TO THE GOSPEL

It's interesting. Paul's letter to the Galatians is probably written around 50 AD, which makes it one of the first books written in the New Testament. And from the very beginning of the Christian faith many people were making the same mistake that is still being made even today.

We have always tried to add something to the gospel of grace.

We say that in order to be saved you have to be baptized in a certain way. We say that in order to be saved you have to have a certain kind of spiritual experience.

We say that in order to be saved you have to have the stamp of approval of a particular church. We say that in order to be saved you have to have a particular political viewpoint.

None of this is true.

We are not saved because of what we do. We are not saved because a certain religious institution says we are saved. We are not saved because we conform to the standards of a certain society.

We are saved because of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

GRACE FROM UPON HIGH

Paul summarizes this gospel of grace very nicely in his opening blessing. He writes to the churches at Galatia,

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Grace and peace come to us from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Salvation is a miraculous divine gift. Gospel means good news. And this good news comes from upon high, from God.

What is this good news? It is very simple.

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

Paul said that Jesus gave himself for our sins. This is not something that we thought up on our own. God through Christ has revealed this to us.

Our faith is not based on reason. Our faith is based on revelation.

In His Son, Jesus God decided to intervene in this world. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are more than just the miraculous story of one man. In the story of Jesus we see God's gracious plan of salvation for the world.

God's grace delivers us from the guilt and shame of the past. God's grace delivers us from a world that insists that our worth is totally tied to how much we accomplish or how much we own.

Paul said, "It doesn't make any difference what the world thinks about us. What really matters is what God thinks about us.

And what does God say? In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. We are forgiven and most importantly we are 'freed' to live in a new way."

Our lives are no longer captive to the failures of the past or the demands of the present.

Instead, we live in the power of hope.

And hope is defined as the confident expectation that God is with us and for us now and forever more. This is according to Paul the "will of our God and Father." It is a message of glory that lasts forever. It is the gospel of eternal life.

DANGER

But, there's a danger. Suppose we make salvation dependent upon something else? Suppose we say that something more is needed in order to be saved?

Then we have gone backwards. We have shifted back from the freedom of grace to the bondage of works. Instead of being empowered by the Spirit of God's forgiveness we once again find ourselves bogged down by the evaluations and expectations of others.

This shift had occurred in the Galatian churches. Paul wrote,

6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— 7 not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.

In most of Paul's letters there is a section in which he gives thanks for all the good things in that particular church, but not so with the church at Galatia. They are going in the wrong direction and Paul is appalled.

One commentator likened it to those car lots where you drive over some metal grates. There is a warning posted. Do not stop or go backward. Severe tire damage will occur.

The same is true in the Christian faith. Once you have received the good news of God's forgiveness and salvation, don't back up and try to add something to it. If you do, you will completely destroy the message. You will pervert the gospel of Christ.

GOOD NEWS, NOT GOOD ADVICE

You can see how upset Paul is by this turn of the events by the strong language that he uses in the next few verses. He says,

"If anyone does this, let them be accursed." That is, let them be condemned. And he drives home the point by writing, "Let me say this again. Let that person be accursed."

You may think that Paul is a bit harsh at this point, but his alarm is justified. The history of the church proves that whenever the gospel has been changed from good news to good advice the results have been nothing short of catastrophic.

Once you turn the good news into good advice, it is no longer the power of God for salvation. The good advice message can be molded to fit the needs of the powers that be. Rulers can use this perverted faith as justification to declare war, persecute the people, and do almost any evil thing all the while claiming that God is on "my side".

This is not my own personal theory. It is the tragic history of the church. We have often done exactly the opposite of what Jesus taught because we have backtracked on the gospel of grace.

The result has been very destructive.

Paul was right. Those who pervert the gospel of grace do bring a curse not only upon themselves but also upon the world. One of the most powerful arguments against the Christian faith is the fact that in some cases terrible things have been done in the name of Christ.

It is a curse when we go backward and try to add something to the good news of God's forgiveness in Christ Jesus. We become strangers to the promises of God and we allow ourselves to be made captive to the old way of life.

So, don't think that this is just some esoteric problem that Paul had with the church in Galatia. This is a problem in the church today. What is the essence of the gospel? What must we do to be saved?

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Believe the promise that in Jesus Christ we are forgiven, and then refuse to backtrack on that promise.

Don't add anything to the gospel.

NOT ABOUT US

A while back I read Rick Warren's popular book, *The Purpose Driven Life*. And in one of his early chapters he made an important statement about the gospel. He wrote, "It's not about you."

And of course that's true. The gospel is not about us. It's about the grace of God and how that grace changes us. We serve out of gratitude to God and not out of compulsion.

But, this does not fit into the modern worldview. In the modern world we truly believe that it's all about us. And in our day the "gospel" has once again been altered (I would say perverted) in order to cater to this mindset.

We talk about the personal benefits of belief.

I saw an article a while back that said religious people have fewer heart attacks. Some claim that religious people have stronger marriages and a better family life.

You've tried strenuous exercise and a positive attitude, why don't you try Jesus? You'll have a better life.

But, you see that message is not about God and what God has revealed to us in Jesus. That message is about us. That message is about what we want to get from God.

And that message will not stand up to the realities of life.

Suppose we have a heart attack? Did our faith fail us? Did we not have enough faith to keep our blood pressure down?

Suppose we learn that Christians get divorced at about the same rate as the rest of the population? (That is true. In some cases Christians even get divorced at a slightly higher rate.)

Suppose our family is not what we want it to be? Does that mean that Jesus has failed us?

No. That means we have perverted the message of the gospel to get what we want, and that has harmed our faith.

We have turned good news into good advice. Our self-help culture tempts us to do this, to turn Christianity into a self-help faith.

And what will happen if we do that?

We will become disillusioned with this perversion of the Christian faith. When this "Christianity" does not produce the results that we want, eventually we will go on to something else.

We've tried Yoga. We've tried bicycling. We've tried meditation. We've tried Jesus. Now we will try a new path to self-gratification.

Paul tells us that it's not about us and what we want. It's about God and what God has revealed in Jesus.

PRAYER

We're Christians not because we have reached out to God. We're Christians because God has reached out to us.

Paul says that it's not about pleasing people. It's about pleasing God. It's not about getting what we want. It's about serving the God who has chosen us by the power of His amazing grace.

I saw a slogan a while back that was a religious takeoff on the Nike ads. It read, "Life's short. Pray hard." That's kind of catchy and cute.

But, there's a problem. Think about what that really means. If we don't get what we want in life, then we haven't prayed hard enough.

So prayer becomes a chore like exercising each day. We have to pray hard in order to get God's blessing. Prayer becomes a means of self-help, a kind of spiritual therapy.

Christians do not believe that.
We do not believe that we pray primarily to get what we want.

We believe prayer is primarily a way to communicate with God. Through reading God's Word and prayer we listen for the voice of God.

And the purpose of these spiritual exercises is to bend our will to God's will.

To say it another way, instead of trying to get what we want, we try to get our lives in sync with what God wants. Prayer gives us the courage to try and please God instead of trying to please the world.

Prayer reminds us that faith was not our idea.

Faith does not come through hard work.
Faith comes through the miraculous intervention of God's grace.

REVELATION

In our lesson for today Paul wrote that the gospel he preached is not of human origin. Instead the message came to him through a "revelation of Jesus Christ."

And the same is true in our own lives.

We are not here because we are the best and the brightest. We are here because God in Christ intervened in our lives.

We don't believe because a preacher or a loved one convinced us that the gospel was true. We believe because the Spirit of God touched our hearts. We believe because the grace of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ came into our lives.

We didn't expect. We didn't deserve it.

But, long ago, while we were yet sinners it happened.

On the night before he was crucified Jesus took the bread and broke it. And he said,

“This is my body broken for you.”

He took the wine and poured it and said,
“This is my blood shed for you.”

Today he prepares that same meal for us. It's how we remember.

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

Let us eat and give thanks.

Amen.