

Auburn Baptist Church
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Dear Church - A Study of the Book of Galatians

Part 1: No Other Gospel

Galatians 1:1-9

Today I want to start walking our way through the book of Galatians. It's been a while since we have gone verse by verse through one book or chapter of Scripture, but it is a good way to gain deeper understanding of doctrines and truths in the Bible of which we often only a larger overarching view.

Galatians is one of the Pauline epistles. In other words, it's one of the letters that the Apostle Paul wrote to a group of Christians he had converted during his missionary journeys. After preaching the Gospel in an area and building up a small church or group of believers, Paul would move on to the next area to start the process over again. Then, if there are issues that pop up in the faith in these churches he started, Paul may write them a letter to clarify or correct the issue.

These letters or epistles were read in the churches and circulated among believers and the words of the Apostle were accepted as coming from God, Himself. So, let's read together the opening verses of Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia.

"Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— and all the brothers and sisters with me, To the churches in Galatia:

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

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!"

Imagine you're in South Africa in the 1970's. Apartheid is at its height. You are embarked on a risky project: to build a community center where everybody will be equally welcome, no matter what their color or race. You've designed it; you've laid the foundation in such a way that only the right sort of building can be built. Or so you think.

The foundation is laid and while work is starting on rising the framework you are called away urgently to another part of the country. A little later you word about the building you had started. A new group of builders are building on your foundation. But they have changed the designed and are installing two meeting rooms, with two front doors, one for whites only and one for blacks only. Some of the local people are mightily relieved. They always thought there was going to be trouble, putting everyone together like that. Others, though, asked the builders why the original idea wouldn't do.

'Oh,' said the builders airily, 'the guy who laid the foundation, he had some funny ideas. He didn't really have permission to make the design. He got it a bit mixed up. We're from the real authorities. This is how its supposed to be done.'

Now imagine you're in central south Turkey during the reign of the Roman Emperor Claudius. Most of the towns worship one or another of the local gods or goddesses, several of whom claim the loyalty of particular racial groups. Some have started to worship the emperor himself, and with him the power of Rome. There is also a significant minority of Jews, with their own synagogue. They are threatened by the growing power of the imperial cult, on top of the usual pagan idolatry and wickedness. And into this town has come a funny little Jew called Paul. . .

Paul's project is building God's kingdom. He doesn't use wood, stone, brick or mortar, but instead builds with people. He lays the foundations by telling them the shockingly good news that there is only one God, the world's creator and that this one God has now unveiled his long-awaited plan for the world and its salvation. This salvation and unveiling came through the appearance of the Jewish Messiah, a man named Jesus. Paul says Jesus was a king-to-end-all-kings whom the Romans executed, but that the one true God raised him from the dead.

That's the beginning of the good news, but it doesn't stop there. According to Paul, Jesus' death and resurrection mean that this God is now building a new family, a single family, a family with no divisions, no separate races, no one-table-for-Jews-and-another-for-Gentiles nonsense. Jews believed that when the Messiah came he would be Lord of all the world; so, Paul argues, he'd have to have just one family. And, though this family is the fulfilment of what this God had promised to the Jews, the remarkable thing is that, because of Jesus, you don't have to be a Jew to belong. The God of Israel wants to be known as 'father' by the entire world. So, with this good news, Paul has laid the foundation of God's kingdom in central south Turkey. Then he was called to move on.

And then he hears the bad news. Other people have come in to build upon the foundation that he laid only they are saying that Paul didn't know what he wasn't doing because they could get in trouble for believing and building in the way he taught. They claimed that Paul got his teachings wrong because they came from what other people had taught but not from the real authorities. Those usurpers/troublemakers were claiming that they had the real building plans for this kingdom because they got their plans from the real authorities.

They taught that this kingdom had to have two divisions: oh, everyone in the kingdom believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but Jews were the inner-circle, the family God had promised to Abraham, and the Gentiles were not. In order for the Gentiles to be part of the kingdom/family,

they had to become Jews. The men must be circumcised. Everyone had to keep the law, which made distinctions between the Jews and Gentiles. The really good news of the kingdom is that you're welcome into God's family if you follow the law of Moses.

Think about this scenario, and you'll see why, in this opening paragraph of his letter to the church of Galatia, Paul sounds as though he is trying to say several things at once, all of them urgent and sharp. It's because what is happening in those young churches is urgent. Those false teachers who have come after him are attacking two very important tenants of the kingdom of God: they are attacking the apostleship of Paul and the pure, unadulterated Gospel, itself.

I. THE TROUBLEMAKERS

Paul and Barnabas had just completed their first missionary journey in Asia Minor to take the good news of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to the entire world when Paul sat down to pen this letter. They had visited the cities of Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe which were located in modern-day southern Turkey in the Roman province of Galatia (hence the name of this Biblical book). Upon returning to Antioch, Paul was accused by some Jewish Christians of diluting Christianity to make it more appealing to Gentiles. These Jewish Christians disagreed with Paul's statements that Gentiles did not have to follow any of the religious laws that the Jews had obeyed for centuries. Some of these accusers even followed Paul to those cities in Galatia and told those Gentiles converts they had to be circumcised and follow all the Jewish laws and customs in order to be completely saved. In essence, they taught that you had to become a Jew in order to become a Christian. They even went so far as to claim that Paul was not authorized to preach the gospel and that he was messing up the true message, because he wasn't one of the original apostles but got his information second- or third-hand.

In response to this, Paul wrote this letter to the Galatian churches. So, you can see why he sounds a bit abrupt, stern, and even urgent in these opening lines.

Let's read Paul's words again in **verses 6-9, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!"**

This is not a "Hi. How you doing? I've been thinking about you" kind of opening. Paul cuts out the flowery, nice greetings we read in some of his other epistles and gets straight to the point. This is a matter of extreme importance that is impacting these young churches. The gospel that they learned from Paul, the truth is being changed and distorted. It's being added on to, and in the process, it's becoming something that it wasn't originally. It's being perverted. The blueprints for the kingdom are being changed and the outcome is that people are going to think that they are not truly a part of the family of God or totally saved unless the do something else.

I don't know about you, but I know if I've worked long and hard on something and someone else comes in or takes what I've been laboring on and tries to change it or "improve" it, or tells me I've done it wrong, I get a bit angry and hurt. I'm not saying that's the right attitude to take, it depends on what the project is that I've labored to hard on. But I'm saying I understand this feeling. And I think Paul is a bit angry here, too. Angry that someone else is coming in and trying to change and pervert what he has labored so hard in accomplishing with the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Angry at these trouble makers, and perhaps a bit perturbed or upset that the Galatians, themselves, are so easily and so quickly turning their backs not only on the true Gospel, but on God who called them to live in grace and unity.

The people that had come in behind Paul were known as Judaizers. They were zealous believers of Christ, but they were Jewish converts to the faith and they believed that the Old Testament practices, like circumcision and dietary restrictions, which they had grown up with is the Jewish faith were requirements of all believers. Most of the believers in Galatia were Gentiles or non-Jews and were unfamiliar with Jewish laws and customs and Paul never mentioned these Jewish requirements when he preached the way of salvation, so they were thoroughly confused.

We don't know why these Judaizers felt compelled to bring their mistaken notion to the new Gentile converts. They may have been motivated by a sincere love for their Jewish heritage, a sincere wish to integrate Judaism with their new Christian faith, or maybe they were jealous of Paul and his authority and successes. But no matter their motive they had to be stopped because their teachings were perverting the true Gospel.

Keep in mind when Paul rebukes these teachers, that he is not repudiating or rejecting everything Jewish. He was a Jew himself. He had worshipped at the Temple in Jerusalem. He had celebrated the festivals and customs. He is not saying there is anything wrong with Jewish customs and practices. What he was concerned with was that these teachers were using the Jewish customs to alter the simple message of salvation. They were adding conditions to salvation that God did not require. Paul is urgently and vehemently reminding them that the simple truth of salvation for Jews and Gentiles comes through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

These Judaizers were twisting the truth about Christ. They claimed to follow him, but they were denying Jesus' work on the cross as being enough for salvation. They were teaching that His death and resurrection were not enough to be saved, that you had to follow Jewish practices and customs too.

II. THE TRUTH TELLER

Paul minces no words when he speaks to these troublemakers in earlier church. Paul, the truth teller, blatantly calls their teachings perversion of the gospel, that should not be trusted or believed even if they look and sound so good that one might think they come straight from heaven. Paul even goes so far as to put anyone or anything, including himself, as being under God's curse if they pervert the Gospel.

It is the message, the Gospel, that is important. It is belief in the truth of the Gospel that leads to salvation, not the messenger. We must never accept someone's word or teaching as true if it does not agree with the gospel message as given to us in Scripture. No matter who they are, no matter

what education they have, no matter how prestigious a ministry they have, no matter how many followers they boast, if they do not teach the unaltered simple truth of salvation through faith in Christ alone then they are to be turned away as false teachers under the curse of God.

Paul uses very strong language when writing to these young believers in Galatia that are being confused and led astray, because this is not an unimportant issue. This is an emergency. This acceptance of falsehoods is a matter of life-and-death. You may end up believing you are saved and going to heaven when in truth you are not.

III. APPLICATION

You may wonder what this has to do with twenty-first century western believers today. It pertains to us in that there are still troublemakers perverting the pure Gospel message within the Christian community. We may not have people telling us we have to follow the mandates of the Jewish culture in order to be saved, but we do have those who tell us that if we don't do this, or if we don't believe in this along with our belief in Christ, then we are not saved. (If you don't speak in tongues, then you are not saved. If you don't support this ministry, then you aren't saved. If you smoke or drink, then you are not saved.) All these beliefs are perversions of the gospel. They are denying the sufficiency of Christ's death and resurrection to save.

We also have to deal with the culture of extreme tolerance in which we live that would tell us that there are many ways to God and to restrict people to believing that Jesus Christ is the only way is being uncompromising and intolerant. There are people who believe in God but think Christ was only a good, moral man or prophet and not the Son of God. This is another perversion of the Gospel and any other Gospel but the one fulfilled by Christ and pronounced by the Apostles cannot save!

There will always be those who pervert the Good News. Either they do not understand what the Bible teaches, or they are uncomfortable with the truth as it stands and therefore feel like they must add to it to make it more palatable. Whether they realize it or not, they are exhibiting pride and arrogance. They are saying that God needs our help, our efforts, in order to fully save us - that we have to do the work of salvation. They are conveniently leaving out **Ephesians 2:8-9, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast."**

We cannot save ourselves. Nor can we add to the saving work of Christ. God completed the work of salvation. We can do nothing but accept it. The truth of the gospel never changes; therefore, the message must never change. We must never add to or take away from the simple truth that salvation is through faith in Christ alone and that it is for everyone who believes, not just one group, or race, or nation, or culture.

And the importance of believing the true Gospel remains the same today. Because belief in a perverted gospel will lead to death instead of eternal life. Belief in a perverted gospel could offer comfort and peace of mind while on earth only for us to hear from the Master's lips upon death, **"I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (Matthew 7:23).**

If we do not teach Jesus' death and resurrection as the way to salvation and life, if we accept an altered Gospel as truth, then we are condemning ourselves and all we teach to death and eternal separation from God. That is just how important this issue is. That is how important it is that we test everything we hear, every message we receive, no matter what the source, against the ruler of God's Word like the Bereans of Acts 17.

Accept no substitutions, Christian! Teach no perverted Gospel! Do not add to or take away from the simple, pure truth of the Good News. It is a matter of eternal life or death.

Christ came to save whosoever believed on Him, Jew, Gentile, black, white, yellow, red, rich, poor, man, and woman, and the work of salvation was completed by Christ. All we have to do is repent of our sins and accept it. Amen.

Prayer