

Galatians: No Other Gospel

Part 1. Desertion and Deception

As we embark upon this journey through Paul's letter to the Galatians, it is crucial to understand the context, purpose, and significance of this powerful epistle. The book of Galatians stands as a beacon of truth and freedom in the New Testament, addressing the core issues of faith, grace, and the law.

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the churches in Galatia, a region in modern-day Turkey. Unlike his other epistles, which were often addressed to specific congregations, this Galatians letter was intended for a group of churches within a particular region. This indicates that the issues Paul addressed were widespread and pressing among the believers there.

The Galatian churches were composed of both Jewish and Gentile converts. This diversity became a breeding ground for conflict, especially concerning the role of the Mosaic Law in the life of a Christian. False teachers, often referred to as Judaizers, had infiltrated the churches, teaching that Gentile converts must adhere to Jewish customs, particularly circumcision, to be truly saved.

Purpose of the Letter

Paul's primary purpose in writing to the Galatians was to defend the gospel of grace and to reaffirm the believers' freedom in Christ. He passionately argued that salvation is by grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ and not by works of the law. This message was crucial because the very essence of the gospel was under threat. Paul expresses his astonishment at how quickly the Galatians were turning to a different gospel:

Galatians 1:6-7 *"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."*

Key Themes

Justification by Grace through Faith: One of the central themes of Galatians is that justification - being declared righteous before God - comes by grace and is embraced by faith in Jesus Christ, not by observing the law. Paul succinctly states this in chapter 2:

Galatians 2:16 *"... know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified."*

Christian Freedom: Paul emphasizes the freedom that believers have in Christ. This freedom is not a license to sin but a liberation from the bondage of the law and sin. Galatians 5:1 declares: *"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."*

The Role of the Law: While the law serves a purpose, it is not the means to our salvation. Paul explains the law's role as a tutor leading us to Christ, who fulfills the law's requirements. In Galatians 3:24, he writes: *"So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith."*

Life in the Spirit: Paul contrasts living by the flesh with living by the Spirit. He exhorts believers to walk by the Spirit, producing the fruit of the Spirit in their lives. Galatians 5:22-23 beautifully outlines this fruit: *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law."*

Significance for Today

The book of Galatians is as relevant today as it was in the first century. In a world where legalism and the pressure to conform to religious requirements continues to infiltrate the church, Paul's message of grace and freedom remains vital. It challenges us to examine the foundations of our faith, to live in the freedom Christ provides, and to rely wholly upon His grace, His empowering presence.

As we delve into this epistle, I encourage you to open your heart to its truths, allowing the Holy Spirit to transform your understanding and deepen your relationship with Jesus Christ. My prayer is that this study of Galatians will renew your appreciation for the gospel and fortify your resolve to stand firm in the freedom that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has secured for you.

In this opening sermon I want us to look at the first ten verses of chapter one. In this letter, Paul passionately defends the true gospel against any distortion, reminding us that salvation comes through grace alone, by faith alone, in Christ alone. As we delve into this passage, we will explore Paul's apostolic authority, his astonishment at the Galatians' desertion, and the dire consequences of preaching a false gospel.

Galatians 1:1-10 *"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! Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ."

1. Paul's Apostolic Authority (Verses 1-2)

Paul opens his letter by asserting his apostolic authority, stating unequivocally that his commission came not from men, but from Jesus Christ and God the Father. This declaration is critical, as it establishes the divine authority behind his message. In a world which was full of false teachers, Paul knew how important it was to show his readers that he was called by God and was speaking the Truth.

Paul's Identity and Authority

Paul identifies himself as an apostle. The term 'apostle' means 'one who is sent.' However, Paul clarifies that his apostleship is not of human origin. He wasn't appointed by any human council or through human lineage but was directly commissioned by Jesus Christ and God the Father.

This divine appointment sets Paul apart and underscores the authority and authenticity of his message. In Acts 9, we read about Paul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, where Jesus Himself called Paul to be an apostle to the Gentiles. This calling was unique and powerful, shaping Paul's whole ministry and message.

In today's world, the concept of authority is often questioned or challenged. Many of us have experienced situations where authority figures have failed or disappointed us. But Paul's authority is not derived from human institutions, which are fallible, but from the infallible God. This distinction is crucial for understanding the weight and reliability of Paul's message to the Galatians.

The Source of Paul's Authority

Paul emphasizes that his authority comes from "*Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.*" This resurrection power not only validated Jesus as the Son of God but also authenticated Paul's apostleship. The resurrection is the cornerstone of the Christian faith, affirming that Jesus has conquered sin and death. Therefore, Paul's gospel, rooted in the resurrection, carries the full weight and authority of God.

The resurrection is not merely a past event; it is a present reality with ongoing implications. It is the power that transforms lives, bringing hope and assurance of eternal life. When Paul speaks of the resurrection, he speaks of the very foundation of our faith. This resurrection power also implies that any gospel contrary to the one rooted in the resurrection is fundamentally flawed.

The Fellowship of Believers

Paul extends his greeting with "*all the brothers and sisters with me.*" This inclusion signifies the unity and collective witness of the Christian community. It wasn't just Paul standing alone; he was supported by a community of believers who affirmed the same gospel. This communal aspect is essential, as it reflects the shared faith and mission of the early church.

In our individualistic culture today, we often overlook the importance of community. The early church thrived on communal faith, support, and accountability. Paul's mention of "*all the brothers and sisters*" with him serves as a reminder that the gospel is not just a personal faith; it is a faith lived in community. We are part of a larger body of believers, and our faith is strengthened when we are together.

2. The Gospel of Grace and Peace (Verses 3-5)

After establishing his authority, Paul extends a blessing of grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This greeting, common in most of Paul's letters, is more than a formality – it encapsulates the essence of the gospel.

Grace and Peace

The terms "grace" and "peace" are rich with theological significance. Grace (Greek: *charis*) refers to God's amazing grace towards His children, the free gift of salvation offered to sinners. Peace (Greek: *eirēnē*) denotes the restored relationship between God and humanity through Christ. Together, they summarize the gospel: through grace, we receive peace with God.

Grace is the foundation of our faith. It is the empowering presence of God, poured out upon us in Christ. We cannot earn it; we can only receive it. This concept is countercultural. In a world that values personal achievement, grace stands as a radical notion that God's love and favour is given so freely to all He chooses. This grace leads to peace, a peace that transcends understanding, a peace that guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7).

Christ's Sacrifice and Deliverance

Paul reminds the Galatians that Jesus “*gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age.*” This statement highlights two critical aspects of the gospel: substitution and deliverance. Jesus' sacrifice was substitutionary - He took our place, bearing the penalty for our sins. Furthermore, His death and resurrection deliver us from the power and influence of this evil age. The term “*rescue*” implies a dire situation from which we cannot save ourselves; only the intervention of Jesus can deliver us.

The present evil age refers to the current world system that is in opposition to God's kingdom. It is marked by sin, corruption, and rebellion against God. Jesus' sacrifice rescues us from this age, not by removing us from it, but by transforming us within it. As believers, we are in the world but not of the world. We are called to live distinctively, reflecting the values of the kingdom of Heaven in the midst of the fallen kingdom of this world.

The Will of God the Father

This rescue operation is “*according to the will of our God and Father.*” The gospel is rooted in the sovereign will and eternal plan of God. It was God's will to send His Son to redeem humanity, demonstrating His love, mercy, and grace. This divine initiative underscores that salvation is entirely God's work, from start to finish.

The will of God is central to understanding our salvation. It reminds us that our salvation is not an afterthought or a contingency plan. It is the unfolding of God's eternal purpose. God's will is good, pleasing, and perfect (Romans 12:2). Understanding that our salvation is part of God's sovereign will give us assurance and security. It means that our salvation is not dependent on our own fluctuating faithfulness but on God's unchanging purpose.

Glory to God Forever

Paul concludes this opening greeting with a doxology: “*to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*” This spontaneous outburst of praise reflects Paul's deep gratitude and reverence for God's redemptive work. It serves as a reminder that all glory and honour belong to God alone, not to any human effort or achievement.

Doxology, or praise, is the proper response to understanding the gospel. When we grasp the magnitude of God's grace and the depth of His love, our hearts overflow with praise. Giving glory to God is not a religious formality; it is the natural response of a heart transformed by the gospel. It shifts our focus from ourselves to God, acknowledging His sovereignty, His goodness, and His majesty.

3. Paul's Astonishment and Rebuke (Verses 6-9)

Paul transitions from his greeting to an expression of astonishment and rebuke. He is shocked that the Galatians are turning away from the true gospel to embrace a distorted version.

Desertion and Deception

Paul is “*astonished*” that the Galatians are “*so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ.*” The term “*deserting*” (Greek: *metatitheshe*) conveys the idea of a military rebellion or a shift in allegiance. The Galatians are abandoning the grace of Christ, which they had initially embraced, to follow a different gospel. This swift desertion is perplexing and deeply troubling to Paul.

Desertion from the gospel is not just a doctrinal error; it is a relational betrayal. It is turning away from the One Who called us into grace. Paul's astonishment reflects his deep concern for the Galatians' spiritual well-being.

The speed at which they are turning away suggests that they were not deeply rooted in the true gospel. This should prompt us to examine our own commitment to the gospel. Are we firmly rooted in grace, or are we susceptible to turning away when faced with false teachings or challenges?

A Different Gospel

Paul clarifies that this "different gospel" is no gospel at all. The term "gospel" (Greek: *euangelion*) means "good news." Any deviation from the true gospel is, by definition, not good news but a perversion. The false teachers, often referred to as Judaizers, were advocating a gospel that required adherence to the Jewish law in addition to faith in Christ. This distortion undermined the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice and introduced legalism into the equation of salvation.

Legalism, the attempt to earn God's favor through adherence to laws and regulations, is a perversion of the gospel of grace. It adds human effort to divine accomplishment, suggesting that Christ's sacrifice is insufficient. Paul's vehement opposition to legalism is a reminder that the true gospel is based solely on God's grace. Any addition to the gospel is a subtraction from the gospel's power and truth.

The Source of Confusion

Paul notes that "*some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.*" These false teachers were creating chaos and leading the Galatians astray. Their teachings were not merely different interpretations but outright perversions of the gospel. Paul's strong language indicates the seriousness of the issue – any alteration of the gospel message is a grave offense.

Confusion in the church often arises from distorted teachings. It creates division and uncertainty, leading believers away from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. Paul's concern for the Galatians highlights the need for discernment in the church. We must be vigilant in guarding the truth of the gospel and addressing false teachings that lead to confusion and division.

Anathema: The Consequence of False Teaching

Paul issues a severe warning: "*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!*" The term "curse" (Greek: *anathema*) signifies being cut off from Christ and condemned. Paul repeats this warning in verse 9 for emphasis. The repetition underscores the gravity of preaching a false gospel - such individuals are under God's curse. Paul's dramatic language conveys the seriousness with which we must guard the purity of the gospel.

The term *anathema* is strong and unambiguous. It conveys the idea of being set apart for destruction. Paul's use of this term highlights the eternal consequences of distorting the gospel. False teaching is not a minor issue; it has eternal ramifications. This sobering reality should drive us to uphold the truth of the gospel with unwavering commitment.

4. Seeking God's Approval (Verse 10)

Paul concludes this section by addressing his motivations and integrity as a servant of Christ. He rhetorically asks, "*Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people?*" His critics may have accused him of seeking human approval by preaching a message of grace rather than legalistic adherence to the law.

However, Paul clarifies that his primary aim is always to please God, not humans. His unwavering commitment to the true gospel, despite opposition, attests to his integrity and dedication. The temptation to please people rather than God is a constant challenge.

In ministry and in our personal lives, the desire for human approval can subtly influence our actions and decisions. Paul's statement challenges us to examine our own motivations. Are we seeking to please people or God? True discipleship involves a commitment to please God, even when it means facing opposition or criticism.

The Cost of Discipleship

Paul declares, *"If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ."* True discipleship often involves standing against popular opinion and facing persecution. Paul's allegiance to Christ supersedes any desire for human approval. This principle challenges us to examine our own motivations - are we more concerned with pleasing people or remaining faithful to Christ?

Being a servant of Christ is costly. It requires a willingness to stand firm in the truth, even when it is unpopular. It involves prioritizing God's approval over human accolades. Paul's example teaches us that faithfulness to Christ is paramount, and it often comes with a price. But the reward is far greater - eternal life and the approval of our Lord and Savior.

Conclusion

As we reflect on Galatians 1:1-10, we are reminded of the centrality and purity of the gospel. Paul's passionate defense underscores that any deviation from the gospel of grace is a serious offense with eternal consequences. The gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age. It is a message rooted in the sovereign will of God, accomplished through the power of the resurrection, and designed to bring glory to God alone.

In a world filled with competing voices and false teachings, we must remain steadfast in the truth of the gospel. Like Paul, let us boldly proclaim the grace and peace that come through Jesus Christ, resisting any attempt to distort or dilute this glorious message. May we seek to please God above all, living as faithful servants of Christ, to the glory of God forever.