

## No Other Gospel

**Intro:** this morning we are going to begin a study of the book of Galatians, so please turn with me to Gal. chapter one and while you do, let me give a little background on this letter. Galatians was written by the Apostle Paul to the churches that he planted in the region of Galatia in Asia Minor on his first missionary journey. You can read about his time in Galatia in the book of Acts 13-14. There are four primary cities mentioned in Galatia where Paul planted churches: Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe and this letter is what's called a circular letter – Paul meant for it to be read by each congregation and then passed on to the other congregations. It is probably the earliest letter written by Paul and it is certainly one of Paul's strongest and most emotional letters, written with a combination of concern, perplexity, and anger as he fears for the future of these churches he planted and loved so dearly. He writes as a father deeply concerned about the direction his children are going in, and as we begin reading this morning, it won't take long for us to find out why. So let's read together chapter 1, verses 1-9.

### Gal. 1:1-9 (pray)

When Billy Graham was in his early 30's his good friend and fellow evangelist Charles Templeton began to question the authenticity of the Bible. Both of them were young up and coming evangelists, both of them were gifted preachers, but most would say that Charles was the more gifted preacher of the two of them. The more Templeton questioned his faith, the more he tried to influence Billy Graham to do the same. "Billy," he would say, "you're 50 years out of date. People no longer accept the Bible as being inspired the way you do. Your faith is too simple."

For the first time in his life Billy Graham found his confidence in God's Word shaken as doubts about his faith began to haunt him. The timing was bad because Graham's biggest crusade yet – the Los Angeles crusade - was quickly approaching. Billy was haunted by the doubts that his friend Templeton stirred in his heart and one early evening he made his way into the foothills of the San Bernardino Mountains and with the moon shining down on him he laid his Bible open on a stump and with tears streaming down his face, he began to wrestle in prayer with his newfound doubts about his faith. It was a pivotal moment in the evangelist's life: would he continue to hold fast to the gospel he had always believed and preached, or would he be influenced by his friend to abandon his faith in Christ?

The Galatian church is at such a pivotal time. They started out strong in their faith when Paul first preached the gospel to them, but false teachers called Judaizers have infiltrated their congregations with a message that they claim doesn't detract from the gospel Paul preached to them, but *adds* to it. Their message was that believing in Christ was an essential *first step* to salvation, but it wasn't enough. Gentile Christians were taught that they needed to become Jewish proselytes and obey the regulations of the law of Moses, especially the rite of circumcision, if they were to be accepted in God's sight.

It's important to realize that their message didn't outright deny Christ's work, it added to Christ work something that the believers needed to do to complete their salvation. Their message was Christ *plus* obedience to the law equals salvation. Knowing that if they were to redirect the Galatian churches away from Paul's gospel, they would have to undermine Paul's credentials and authority in the eyes of the Galatian churches, and we can surmise what their attacks on Paul looked like by his defense.

First, they claimed that Paul shortchanged them. He preached the gospel but not the *whole* gospel. They probably suggested that it was the fear of man that kept Paul from teaching the whole counsel of God to the Gentiles: he was afraid that if he taught that they needed to obey the law and get circumcised that his message would be rejected by them so he relaxed the requirements to make it easier to get converts.

Secondly, it seems that they suggested that Paul was a “second hand” apostle who got his directions and authority from those who sent him – Barnabas, the Apostles in Jerusalem, and so his authority was derived from men, and they claimed, he wasn’t even being faithful to discharge their full message. The Judaizers claimed to be the authentic ones coming with the backing and authority of the true Apostles and the full message of the gospel.

This is why Paul opens the letter by claiming his authority as an apostle didn’t come from men or through man – there was no human agency that ordained him as an apostle, but it was through Jesus and God the Father. Paul doesn’t write this because he’s insecure about his calling, but he knows that if they don’t believe his call is legitimate, than they have no reason to believe his message is either. Paul wasn’t appointed as an apostle by men - he had a supernatural encounter with Jesus Christ and that alone was his credential, his validation. Later in this chapter and the next he will continue to make that point.

In verse 3 he greets them with his usual impartation of grace and peace from God, but in his greeting he gives an amazingly concise outline of what the gospel is. Let’s read it again together:

*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. (Vv. 3-5)*

Jesus didn’t come to teach us, or help us, he came to deliver us – the word means to rescue us - from the present evil age. The Judaizers were teaching that Jesus came to help us get back on track so that we could then finish the job by our obedience to the law. Paul says Jesus came to rescue us. People only need rescuing when they are helpless to help themselves. We were, Paul is saying, helpless – absolutely helpless – to save ourselves. We didn’t need help, we needed rescue.

### **Drowning doesn’t look like drowning**

I read an interesting article entitled “Drowning Doesn’t Look Like Drowning”. It opened with this story: a captain was standing on the deck of his ship when suddenly he jumped from his boat fully clothed and began swimming furiously toward a couple that was swimming between their anchored sportfisher and the beach. The husband turned to his wife and said, “I think he thinks you’re drowning.” Minutes earlier they had been playing in the water and she had screamed but now they were standing neck deep on a sand bar and were perfectly fine. They tried to wave the captain away, telling him they were ok, but the captain, who was also a former lifeguard, continued on. They began to get annoyed as they tried to wave him away and he kept swimming hard towards them. When he got to them, to their surprise, he yelled, “move!” and swam past them to where their nine year old daughter, not ten feet away from them, was quietly drowning. Only when she was safely above the water’s surface in the captain’s arms could she burst into tears and say, “daddy!”

A drowning victim usually doesn’t look like their drowning. Many of the things we expect like splashing or yelling or waving of arms don’t usually happen. They can’t yell for help because the brief moment they have with their mouth above the water is only long enough to exhale and inhale. They don’t wave because they instinctively use all their arm motions to press downward on the water to keep them above the surface. This sentence intrigued me:

*Physiologically, drowning people who are struggling on the surface of the water cannot stop drowning and perform voluntary movements such as waving for help, moving toward a rescuer, or reaching out for a piece of rescue equipment.*<sup>1</sup>

The Bible tells us that we live in a world that is drowning in sin, death, and spiritual darkness and we were helpless to rescue ourselves, even in the smallest degree. Paul writes in Ephesians two that we were *dead* in our transgressions and sins. We had no power to save ourselves – not even a little bit. Jesus rescued us by giving himself on the cross for our sins to save us from the evil of this present world and the evil of our own present sin. Jesus didn't come to assist us get back to God, he came to rescue us from sin and death and bring us back to God. And, Paul is deliberate to clue us in that this was by the will of our God and Father – it is a loving rescue planned by a loving Father. And because it is all of God's doing, He alone gets all the glory. We get none of it. These verses contain a beautifully concise outline of the gospel.

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We see in verse 6 how serious this is to Paul. Normally this is where he would commend the church for evidences of grace he saw in them. Even the Corinthians, as messed up as they were, got a full paragraph commending them for evidences of grace Paul saw in them. There is no such commendation of the Galatians – Paul immediately launches into a strong and even angry rebuke, expressing his astonishment that they have deserted the gospel of Christ for another gospel – but, he quickly adds, there is no other gospel, there are only dangerous distortions of the gospel.

The distortion the false teachers were bringing was a form of legalism, which is simply trying to earn God's favor and acceptance through our efforts. For the Galatians it took the shape of trying to live according to the law, but there are other forms it takes today.

In his book on Galatians, Tim Keller notes three popular forms legalism takes today.

1. In some churches, it is taught, either explicitly or implicitly that we are saved by a deep surrender to Christ corresponding to right beliefs and behaviors. This is subtle because we do want to surrender to Christ's lordship, and I would even say that if there is no evidence of surrender to the Lordship of Christ in someone's life, there is a distinct danger that they are not saved even if they profess a faith in Christ. But it can be taught that only when we come to Christ with a deep enough sorrow and repentance, and a strong enough commitment, that we are saved. This is a distortion because functionally it teaches us that we are saved through Christ *and* an appropriate level of sorrow and commitment. Keller points out it's not the *level* of our faith, but the *object* of our faith that saves us.
2. The second distortion is that it really doesn't matter all that much what you believe as long as you are a good and loving person. This might sound very open minded on the surface but it is actually a grace-killer and destroys the gospel of Christ.
  - a. First because it teaches that good works are enough to get to God. If that is true, then Jesus' death wasn't necessary to save us, all it takes is virtue to reach God.

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<sup>1</sup> Drowning People Don't Look Like Their Drowning, [Mario Vittone](#), pg 2

- b. And that kills grace because it means that bad people have no hope. People who fail morally, or have tainted pasts, or don't live up to a certain ideal have no hope of heaven. The gospel of Christ reaches out to the worst of sinners and says, "there is hope for you – not based on your performance, but based on the grace of God".
3. The third distortion are those churches that lay out a set of extra biblical rules and behaviors that they say are needed to be accepted by God. These are churches that emphasize appearance and traditions and often they are known more for what they're against than what they're for. Don't wear this, don't listen to that, don't drink this, don't do that. It might be no long hair (for guys) or no pants (for women) or no music with a beat or no modern translations for the Bible, or some other set of expectations, but there is a strong pressure to conform to a set of expectations, and if you don't they're real good at sending an unspoken message: you don't belong here. You're not accepted by us.

Here's the problem with this kind of church: they wouldn't have accepted any of Jesus' followers except Paul, and he only would have fit in before he got saved! Jesus was followed by rough and salty fishermen, by prostitutes, by dishonest tax collectors, by sinners and outcasts of every shape and size – and Jesus loved and redeemed them!

Here's why this book is so important for us here at GCC. It's a reminder that we want to be – and more importantly *must* be – centered on the gospel of Jesus Christ which is a gospel of grace. We are saved by grace through the work of Christ and nothing else! Christ plus anything else equals nothing!

We may get a lot wrong here, but one thing we don't want to get wrong is that we are drowning victims who have been rescued by the undeserved love and mercy and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is our message and by the grace of God may He always be. Whether we meet in a school or our own building, what we are built around must always be Christ and what we are built on must always be Jesus Christ – the one true foundation of the church.

When the next generation step up and take the reins of this church, they'll probably sing different songs and probably in a different style. Maybe they'll dress differently (might even wear ties and jackets!) They might do something we'd consider radical and almost heretical, like stop doing the announcements in the services. But for as long as GCC exists, may we be centered on the one gospel that was given to us, not by Paul, not by Peter, not by Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, but by God through these vessels. There is no other gospel.

And individually we also need to keep the gospel of grace central. God doesn't love you more or less based on your performance. He doesn't accept you more or less because of how you did this week. He loves you and accepts you completely in Christ, and if you aren't in Christ, than your sin blocks you from God and will eternally unless you come to Christ in faith. The good news (gospel) is that you can't be too far gone for Him to forgive you and call you His son or daughter if you come to Christ in faith. The bad news is you can't be so good that He can accept you any other way. The gospel is free, and it's exclusive – Jesus said there's no other way to get to God except through him.

Paul says if he or anyone else – even an angel – preaches any other gospel, let him be accursed. Cut off from God and damned. Wow. The gospel isn't up for renegotiating. It is from God, it never changes, and no one and nothing can change it without being accursed by God – because if the gospel is changed, it loses its power to save eternal souls and condemns those souls to hell. That is why we must always hold fast to the gospel of Christ, the gospel of grace, and never let our grip on the gospel slip.

## **Back to Billy Graham**

As Billy Graham knelt there in the woods under the moon, with his Bible open on a stump and tears streaming down his face, he came to a place where he yielded his doubts and questions to God in faith and settled them by holding fast to God's word and the gospel of Christ by believing it with all his heart.

Though Billy Graham and Charles Templeton remained friends for most of their lives, Templeton never returned to the faith he had known as a youth. Just two years before his death in 2001 he published a critique of Christianity entitled *Farewell To God: My Reasons for Rejecting the Christian Faith*.

For Billy Graham, just a few months after he knelt in the moonlight and proclaimed his determination to believe God's Word, he saw God move in an extraordinary way in the Los Angeles crusade and BG became a household name.

Today there is a simple bronze plaque that marks the spot where Graham determined to hold fast to God's Word. But more importantly there is fruit that glorifies Jesus. Fruit that came from decades of preaching the gospel faithfully. And there is anticipation for the day when he will see his Savior that he has trusted and served all his life. When asked by James Dobson if he feared his impending death, his answer was, "O Jim, I can't wait to see Jesus!"

May the Lord give us grace to hold fast to God's word and the gospel of Jesus Christ all the days of our lives too. Let's pray.