

The Gospel of God

Intro:

Just by way of a quick recap, the book of Galatians was written by the Apostle Paul to the churches in the region of Galatia. Paul planted these churches on his first missionary journey to Galatia, and they started out strong in their faith, but false teachers called Judaizers infiltrated the churches and began to teach that believing in Jesus was a good start but it wasn't enough to save them – if they were going to enter into covenant with God they had to observe the law of Moses, and in particular, be circumcised. Their message was “Jesus plus obedience to the law equals salvation”.

In order to convince the Galatians to desert Paul's message, they tried to damage Paul's credibility with three accusations: 1) he was a second hand apostle who got his marching orders from the Jerusalem HQ where the he Paul was a man pleaser who tailored his message to suit the crowd he was with, and 3) Paul hadn't been faithful to preach the full gospel to the Gentiles because he was afraid that if he preached the necessity of believing in Jesus *and* keeping the law of Moses, they would reject his message. So out of fear of being rejected, he relaxed the standards for becoming a Christian.

With these accusations in mind, let's pick up in verse 6 and read to the end of the chapter. Read **Gal. 1:6-24 (pray)**

In chapters 1 and 2 Paul is defending his apostolic ministry from these attacks of the Judaizers and he closes out chapter one with two points that emphasize that God, not man, is at the center of all that Paul does:

- I. **The approval he seeks is the approval of God, not man**
- II. **The gospel he preaches is the gospel of God, not man**

- I. **The approval he seeks is the approval of God, not man (vs. 10)**

When our kids were younger we used to read to them every night before they went to bed, and one book we came across was especially insightful about the problem of trying to please everyone all the time. It was called *A Bad Case of Stripes* and it's about a young girl named Camilla Cream who is so afraid of being different from the crowd, and wants so badly to please everyone, that one day she finds she takes on any color or pattern that is suggested to her. When her class recites the pledge of allegiance, she turns red, white and blue! Her classmates have a great time calling out different patterns just to make her look like whatever they want and as the experts are called in to treat her things just get worse and worse as everything they suggest comes true. On top of that, Camilla Cream has a secret love that she doesn't want anyone to know about because she knows they would laugh at her if they found out. If you want to find out what that secret is and how she gets cured, you'll just have to get the book *A Bad Case of Stripes* (and if you have young kids I highly recommend it!).

But the problem of wanting desperately to fit in with the crowd and please everyone isn't just a problem for kids. We're all tempted to repackage ourselves in order to be accepted by whatever crowd we're with. We all feel pressure at times to say or do things just to please people. And that's what the Judaizers were accusing Paul of doing. When he's with the Jews, he preaches Jesus plus circumcision. But when he's with Gentiles, where he knows that circumcision wouldn't be well-received, he conveniently omits it

from his gospel. Paul, they say, is a man-pleaser: his stripes change – his message changes - to please whoever he's with.

Paul counters this accusation by unequivocally declaring that the gospel he preached to the Galatians is the only true gospel and it can't be changed by anyone ever. Even, he says, if he changed his mind and came back with a revision of the gospel – or even if an angelic being appeared to them and amended the gospel, then he, or that angel, should be accursed – cut off from God forever. Ironically, in 1823 Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon faith claimed to have been visited by the angel Moroni who, in his words, restored the true gospel. Not surprisingly, it adds our work to the gospel in order to be saved. Those who follow Mormon beliefs should have taken their warning from Paul. Notice, Paul doesn't say "even if a being claiming to be an angel from heaven", but "even if an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary...let him be accursed (or cut off from God and damned)" No being in heaven or on earth has the authority to revise or change the gospel because the gospel is God's gospel. Paul calls it the "gospel of God" in Romans 1:1. It's not a gospel from men, and it's not a gospel from angels. The gospel is from God and anyone who tampers with it will be accursed forever, because their tampering will negate the gospel of its power to save sinners and will then mislead people into a Christless eternity. The stakes couldn't be higher.

And so Paul is pronouncing damnation on the Judaizers who have infiltrated the Galatian churches. He will have more strong words for these false teachers later in the book. So what Paul is saying in verse 10 is, "does this sound like the words of a guy who cares about pleasing people? I have no interest in pleasing these Judaizers – let them be accursed forever." Paul isn't a man-pleaser, and he doesn't change his message based on what people want – he has been entrusted with a message from God and pleasing God by faithfully proclaiming that message is all he cares about.

People pleasing gives us no true north

This ferocious desire to please God no matter what is how God wants us to live as well. When Paul talks about seeking to please man or God, he isn't saying that we should never try to please a person or do anything someone wants us to do. He's talking about what is at the center of who we are and why we do what we do. If at the center of who we are and what we do is a compelling force to please people, to make them happy, then we can't serve Christ because Christ doesn't always please people. The message of Christ isn't necessarily a crowd-pleaser, and if we repackage the message of Christ to please everyone, it won't be the true message of Christ. At some point we need to decide: will I live to please God or people?

Another way to understand what Paul means by pleasing men or God is he's talking about what guides our lives, what does our compass point to as true north. If pleasing people in our lives, or pleasing the people who happen to be near us at the time, or trying to fit in with public opinion is our priority, we will get lost in the ever-changing and ultimately meaningless landscape of people's approval because our compass has no fixed true north.

People's opinions change all the time – politicians know that. Polls are taken every day to gauge what people think about a subject or a politician *today*. Trying to please people all the time is exhausting because it changes constantly and it doesn't give us the fixed star we need to guide our lives by.

But more than constantly changing, seeking people's approval all the time is also meaningless because people don't determine what's true or good or right. Just because a majority believes something to be right or good or true, doesn't make it so. I came across a copy of the New York Times newspaper

headline from August 20, 1934 when 90% of Germany voted to give Hitler absolute power over Germany. The fact that 9 out of 10 people supported Hitler didn't make Hitler right, it made 9 out of 10 people very, very wrong.

Truth isn't determined by majority vote. What's right isn't determined by majority vote. God alone determines what is right and true. That might offend a lot of people, but the Bible says it doesn't matter how many people it offends. They are wrong and He is right. In heaven, the most powerful beings in existence only and ever seek the approval and pleasure of One – the One being who truly has absolute power, but who alone is able to rule absolutely because He is perfect and He created everything. The more we learn to align our lives to His will, the more our lives will point to true north.

II. The gospel he preaches is the gospel of God, not man

His second defense is that he didn't receive the gospel he preached by any man. Paul

then shares his personal testimony, how he was hell-bent on destroying the church of God and how he was advancing as a leader in Judaism because of his zeal for the traditions of Judaism. The trajectory of his life wasn't leaning towards following Christ, he wasn't considering Christianity as a plausible faith – he was dedicated to Judaism and out to kill Christians. Man had no hand in the gospel he preached, and man had no hand in his coming to faith. He was against Christ with everything in him and then – wham! – Jesus revealed himself to Paul and Paul became as radically committed to Christ as before he was to Judaism.

Continuing with this “not man, but God” theme, he explains that he wasn't taught the gospel by men. He didn't consult with men to get his gospel straight – it was given through revelation to him. What's amazing about this is that Paul was a very learned scholar in the OT, and his knowledge of the OT led him to violently oppose the claim of Christians that Jesus was the Messiah. How could he be when the Bible says that all who hang on a tree are cursed? Jesus was accursed of God – any claim to be Messiah was proven to be false when Jesus was crucified. That's why Paul was so vehemently committed to destroying this false movement called Christianity. But when Jesus revealed himself to Paul, and gave him the Holy Spirit, all of a sudden Paul began to see the OT in a different light – his understanding of the scriptures opened up and he saw Christ everywhere where once he didn't see him at all. And he saw that Jesus was cursed by God – not because he was a false Messiah, but because he took our curse upon himself and it all made sense to Paul! So powerful was this supernatural experience that in a short time he could preach Christ with a power and reasoning that no one in the synagogues could go toe to toe with his logic.

For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. 20 And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” 21 And all who heard him were amazed and said, “Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?” 22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. Acts 9:19-22

Paul continues his autobiography by countering the claim that he got his gospel from the apostles and derived his authority in ministry from them. He preached for three years before he ever went to Jerusalem and when he did go, he only saw Peter and James, and spent just two weeks with them. It would be 14 years later before Paul went up again and addressed the group of apostles and we'll be

looking at that next week. Paul's gospel was from God and his authority to minister was from God and God alone. The point of all this is that because the gospel is all of God we can know it's true.

So, how do we know the gospel is true?

So let me close by asking this question: how do we know the gospel is true? How can we know that we can trust it is from God and not from man? Maybe someone here is struggling with that very question. Maybe you're an honest skeptic and you understand that Paul was *claiming* that his gospel was from God, and yes, he had an experience he thought was from God, but how do we know it really was? How is his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road any different (or more to be believed) than Joseph Smith's encounter with the angel Moroni? Or the Prophet Mohammed who claimed to have received his revelation from the arch angel Gabriel?

Let me, very briefly, give three reasons why the evidence that Jesus is really the Savior, and the gospel is true is compelling. It can't be proven and I'm not going to try. There is enough to make it a logical and reasonable conclusion, but in the end, God insists we come to Him by faith, not by hard proof. But let me give three reasons why believing the gospel and claims about Jesus is a reasonable step of faith based on compelling evidence.

1. The thousands of years of Biblical promise and prophecy woven into history

Jesus didn't appear out of nowhere and just say, "hey, I'm true and you need to believe in me". If that were the case, then I would agree, Paul's revelation would carry no more weight than Joseph Smith's or Mohammed's claims to have received a revelation from God.

But starting in Genesis, there is this promise that God would send a redeemer. That prophetic promise grew and unfolded and more detail was added until we knew he'd be born of a virgin. We knew he'd be a king, but a humble servant too. He'd open the eyes of the blind, the lame would walk, the deaf would hear, and the poor would have the gospel preached to them. He would come riding on the foal of a donkey. He would be pierced for our transgressions, he would die for our sins. Death would not hold him and corruption would not rot away his flesh. And before he came, God would send a forerunner who would make straight the paths for this coming Messiah.

For thousands of years these promises grew and built hope, and then one day, John the Baptist exploded on the scene. And then Jesus. And he fulfilled hundreds of OT prophecies. One mathematician calculated that the chance of fulfilling just 8 of these prophecies would be a 10^{17} th power. Covering Texas with silver dollars two feet deep and marking one, blindfolding a person and the odds of them choosing the right silver dollar would be one in 10^{17} th power.

there is layer upon layer of reason to believe this is the real deal.

2. The uniqueness of Jesus.

There has never been a historical figure like Jesus – not even close. His teaching has affected the world far more than any other historical figure, but his teaching forces us to a decision about him. He claimed to be God, and the only way to God the Father. These claims can't be the claim of a good man. They mean that he was, as CS Lewis put it, either a lunatic, a liar, or the Lord of lords. And he died on a cross – saying it was for our sins and fulfilling many prophecies. And then he rose again – as witnessed by hundreds who were willing to go to their deaths for the sake of what they saw and heard. Then the

followers of this man who died and was raised began to do miracles in his name and thousands upon thousands became followers too. This is what enraged Saul (later Paul), but then he encounters this Jesus that he knew about.

As I already said, but it bears repeating, there has never been another figure like Jesus. You got to deal with Jesus somehow – he can't be ignored unless you want to be intellectually dishonest. We don't have a hundredth of evidence that men like Plato or Aristotle existed that we have for Jesus' existence, yet no serious person questions their existence. And there are few historical events that have as much historical evidence as the resurrection – so much so that there are skeptics who have undertaken to disprove the resurrection like Frank Stone, or God's existence, like CS Lewis or Lee Strobel, who started out as antagonists but were brought to faith by their study of Christ. What do you do with the claim that Jesus rose again? Deny it? Think it's a myth made up by men willing to die to perpetuate something they knew wasn't true? Ignore it? Pretend it didn't happen or it doesn't have any bearing on your life? If someone really did rise from the dead – which we all know is absolutely impossible for any man to do – and claims to be the only way we can have eternal life and also be raised from the dead one day, he has earned our ear. Jesus is unique among all figures in history – the question is, what will you do with him?

3. *The power of Christ*

In the end, I don't believe it's all a matter of reasoning. If God is real, and Jesus is really the Son of God, then he is able to reveal Himself as the true and living God to those whom He chooses to. Lee Strobel was an atheist when he decided to investigate the claims of Christ, and he began in a strange way for an unbeliever: he prayed and asked God to reveal Himself if He was real. He figured if he was right and there was no God, he only wasted 30 seconds, but if God did exist, he wanted to know the truth at any cost. That's the kind of honest grappling with truth that the Bible says will get answers. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "all who seek, will find". Honest seeking will find God. Dishonest seeking, prideful mind games, living by a personal agenda that blinds us to truth or even causes us to suppress or deny truth, well, God usually hides Himself from those who don't humbly and honestly want the truth. There are exceptions – Paul was an exception in that he wasn't seeking – but in general if people don't want God, they won't find Him.

The gospel is *true*. And it's from God. If you're not a follower of Christ, I hope you will seriously consider his claims and how, if true, they affect your life. If you're ready to ask Jesus to be your Savior, in a minute I'm going to close us in prayer and I invite you to pray with me. If you're not ready, and you're still investigating his claims – that's great. Keep investigating with an open mind and an honest heart, and maybe even ask God to reveal Himself to you. He is more than able to do it.

The gospel is true because it is from God. We can trust it, we can trust our eternal destiny with it. It's the only thing we can trust our eternal destiny with. It is the gospel of God, it is the gospel of Christ.