

## **What the Gospel Isn't, Is, and How it Changes You**

### **Galatians 1:10-2:10**

We're going to look at three things: firstly, what the gospel isn't; secondly, what the gospel is, and thirdly, how the gospel has the power to change you - in how you see yourself, how you see others, and especially how you see the poor.

#### **What the Gospel Isn't**

Let's say you're sat on the train. And sat next to you is a young guy on the phone. And he's talking loudly enough that it's impossible not to hear what he's saying - even if you can't hear what the person he's talking to is saying, but you can guess! Because this young guy is clearly agitated and saying, 'non, ma cherie, that's not what happened. Non, I didn't meet her for lunch. Non, I didn't go to her place. Non, that's not what I said.' And you can just guess what the other person's saying, can't you, what he's being accused of.

And it's like that with Galatians. It's like we're listening to one end of the conversation, but from what Paul says, you can pretty much guess what's going on at the other end, in Galatia.

And teachers, who have probably come from Jerusalem, have arrived and are telling these new Christians that if they really want to be saved, yes they need to believe in Jesus, but to be really in, the guys need to be circumcised, and guys and girls need to obey the law of Moses. Effectively, they've got to become Jews, as well as Christians.

But that's not all. It also seems they're saying, '*And* this is the original gospel, the Jerusalem gospel, the gospel that Peter, James and John, the original apostles are teaching. And that's who Paul learnt the gospel from, except he's gone and corrupted it. And you know why he's done that? To try and win you over. The only reason he's *not* telling you to be circumcised is because he knows you'd find that hard to swallow, and he's a man-pleaser. But not us, we're telling you the unvarnished truth.'

So what does Paul do? He reminds them of his own story - of what his life was like before God broke in. And look what he says, v14: 'I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.' So, everything that these false teachers want to make these Galatians - that was Paul. He was Jewish, and he was highly religious. He didn't just study the law of Moses, he obeyed it, and he did it with zeal. He was the religious rule-keeper par excellence. And his personal and professional trajectory was only up.

But now he looks back and says, guys, it doesn't work. Religion can never save you, because obeying the rules can never change your heart. In fact, he says, look what it made me: v13, 'you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.' So, sure I was very religious, like these teachers want to make you, but it left me filled with hate.

You know how on Amazon you get those one star reviewers who wish they could give zero stars - well that's Paul: 'I bought this product, I followed the instructions. And believe me, it's not worth your money' - or in our case, your life.

And there's a reason for that. Christian thinkers have long argued that the sin under every sin is pride - that excessive belief in your own abilities; that you're better, or more worthy, or more deserving than others - so you deserve to be at the centre.

But can religion - the idea that by obeying commandments and observing religious duties you can earn God's favour - save you from that? Can it deal with pride? And the answer is, no. In fact, it makes it worse. Because if you think you can make yourself right with God by being a highly moral person, and you think you're achieving that, and that you're worthy of God's respect, it'll make you proud, and you'll look on others who are failing to do so as well as you either with scorn, or with pity - both of which are proud. So religion can never deal with pride - that problem under every problem.

But it does something else as well - it has this knack of imprisoning you in a cultural ghetto. You see if religion is reduced to rule keeping - what you can and cannot do, what you can and cannot eat, what you can and cannot wear, places you can and cannot go, that's a way of being, a culture, that can make you acceptable to God. But that's going to mean you're going to hold at arms length, and distrust, or attack anyone from inside or outside that culture who you see as a potential threat to that culture. Which is why, in his previous life, Paul was persecuting the Christians.

So Paul hears what these false teachers are saying and he says, that's not the gospel. Thinking you've got to earn God's favour is not good news, because it can never change your heart, or make you more loving. It can never save you. Religion isn't the gospel. In fact, the gospel saves you from religion.

### **What the Gospel Is**

And Paul tells us three things the gospel is. Firstly, *it's a revelation*. Look at v11-12: 'For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.'

So the message Paul's preaching isn't something Paul cooked up. It wasn't like he was sat in his office one day, thinking, 'I need a career change. Maybe I could make a living out of telling people about Jesus' - he was persecuting Jesus' people. And it was only when the risen Jesus knocked him off his horse, in that totally unwanted encounter on the Damascus Road, that Paul's world was upended. It was revelation, Paul says.

But if it wasn't something Paul cooked up, it also wasn't something the leaders back in Jerusalem taught him. Which is why he repeatedly makes the point that, to start with, he didn't travel to Jerusalem, and when he did it was three years later to get to know Peter. And then he didn't go again for 14 years.

And yet, the gospel they were preaching was the same as his, because this realisation that broke into Paul's life, that Jesus is God's Son, that when he died on the cross he was dying for our sins, that God raised him from the dead, that as a result we're not saved by what we do, but by faith in what Jesus has done, is independent of any human teacher - it's not man's gospel at all, Paul says, this is God's good news, and the risen Jesus himself revealed it to me.

Now you might think, great, but who Paul did or didn't get his gospel from hardly seems relevant to me. Well, firstly, hardly a year goes by without some article appearing in the media saying, 'ah yes, but there are all these other early gospels that the church suppressed. And that was the real, original

Christianity, and Paul, he was a Johnny-come-lately, who corrupted it all.’ And you can just imagine what Paul would say to that!

But secondly, like we said last week, you’re going to base your beliefs about life and God on some authority or other. And Paul would say to you: ‘Listen, I didn’t believe this either, in fact, I was hell-bent on destroying it. But this revelation of Christ has turned my life upside down.’ And if you’re not yet a Christian, Paul is like a mini-example of the questions that should challenge you to seriously think this through. You see, before you dismiss Christianity, you’ve got to think why the early Christians, who, like Paul, were all Jewish and fiercely monotheistic, began worshipping, a man, Jesus of Nazareth, as God. What happened to explain that? And Paul would answer, we saw Jesus raised from the dead. This gospel is God’s doing.

But if we’re honest, that could be intellectually true, and still have no effect on us. So look at the second thing Paul tells us about this revelation: and that is that ***it’s personal***. Look at v15-16: ‘But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me...’ Now, that ‘to me’ is literally, ‘in me’. That God revealed his Son in me. You see, while religion is about head knowledge: follow these practices, obey these rules, and you can earn angel points, the gospel is an experience of God’s grace in your heart. It’s an experience of God’s love for you in Christ, of seeing with the eyes of your heart that when Jesus died on the cross he died for you, and it melts your heart. It’s a revelation of Jesus *to* you and *in* you.

But, thirdly, it’s also a **revelation through you**. Look at v16 again, God ‘was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the gentiles.’ We have a family WhatsApp group. And as soon as one of us sees something funny, or has some news, it goes on the group. Because you’ve just got to share it. And that’s Christianity. By its very nature, it’s missionary. It’s a revelation of Jesus to us in the gospel, in us by the Spirit, and then through us to the world. That when you know that this is what God has done for us in Jesus, you have to share it, you have to proclaim *him*.

And Paul does say, *him*, doesn’t he? Not, 7 steps to inner peace, or 5 keys to spiritual maturity. That’s the kind of message these other teachers were pushing. But for Paul, the gospel is an encounter with Christ that changes your life, and it’s *him* we proclaim.

So the gospel isn’t religion, and unlike religion, it really does have the power to upend your life for good.

### **How the Gospel Changes You**

Look at v4-6, ‘Because of false brothers secretly brought in - who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery - to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.’

Now, we don’t know whether this interaction with these false brothers happened in Jerusalem or elsewhere. Whichever it was, the picture he uses to describe their teaching - slavery, is strong isn’t it? That while the gospel of God’s grace brings freedom, follow them and you’ll be like a chained slave, is not exactly pulling his punches. So why say that?

Because if you think you can save yourself by what you do and don't do, performance is always going to be your slave master. Have you done enough, are you achieving enough, how are you comparing to others? And like a slave master driving on his slaves, you'll never be able to rest.

But, when you know that in his grace God already loves you, and accepts you because of Jesus, you're going to know true freedom. And this passage gives us four areas where that can be true for you.

Firstly, ***your identity***, how you see yourself. You see, in religion, if it's down to you, as you review your past, you'll either think you've got reasons for pride - because you're doing pretty well; or, you'll feel guilt and insecurity, because you see all the ways you've failed.

But Paul can look back over his life, even his hate-filled past, and see God's grace. Verse 15: 'But when he who had set me apart before I was born...' Before I had done anything to earn God's favour, he had his hand on me. So all that studying the Old Testament, all those hours spent in Rabbi school, all those years I might be tempted to think were wasted - now I see that God was preparing me for this. And when I was persecuting the church, v16, God 'called me by his grace.' So 'despite my hate, despite the kind of person I was, God loved me and called me and drew me in. And when others heard of what God had done in my life', v24, 'they glorified God because of me.'

Why? Because the gospel turns our failures into praise for God's glorious grace - and both humbles you, and fills you with joy, all at the same time. But programs of self-help and advice for self-improvement, which is what religion is, either result in you getting the glory, if you can keep up with the program, boosting your pride, or in despair if you don't.

You see, religion can never redeem your past - only grace can. Only grace can give you the ability to look back over your life and see how, even when you were a jerk, God was at work.

And think about the future? How can you look at the future with hope? You see, if you're a slave to performance, any hope is based on you - still managing to pull it off, which is pride, or you'll be unsure if you can, which leads to insecurity. But Paul knows that because of God's grace, God takes hold of our lives with a purpose and the future is filled with hope, because Christ will never leave us or forsake us.

Secondly, the gospel frees you from being enslaved by ***people's opinion of you***. Look at v10, where Paul says 'Am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God?' And he's probably answering this accusation that the only reason he's not teaching circumcision is that he's a man-pleaser - trying to make the gospel easy to swallow.

And Paul's saying, 'no! the opposite's true'. And that's why he calls the other apostles in v2 and 6, 'those who *seemed* to be influential'; and 'what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality.' And v9, those 'who *seemed* to be pillars.' He's not being disrespectful.

You see, if performance is your slave master, your identity is inevitably going to be tied up in with what others think of you and your performance. So you'll always be wanting the approval of those who seem influential. And that can lead you to say 'yes' to things you should say 'no' to, and 'no' to things you should say 'yes' to. Instead, knowing that you are loved by God regardless of your performance, or what others think of you frees you to do the right thing. You don't need to be a man

pleaser. God is already pleased with you in Jesus, and that gives you the courage, a fearlessness to live in ways that please him, regardless of what others think.

Thirdly, the gospel frees you to *welcome people who aren't like you*. Look at 2:1: 'Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me.' Now Barnabas and Paul were from the same kind of stock. They were both Jews. They were both from the provinces, not Jerusalem. And they both had religious pasts - Barnabas was a Levite, Paul a Pharisee. But Titus - Titus was a total outsider. Titus was a Greek, a gentile. He's the kind of guy that the old, religious Paul, would never have associated with. Because when you think you're made acceptable by whether or not you're circumcised, or by what you eat, or what you wear, by your cultural practices; or if you think you're acceptable based on your moral conduct - you're either going to see people unlike you as unclean, or unworthy, and you'll judge them and separate from them.

But here is Paul walking into Jerusalem with Titus as his friend and brother. Explain that!

Well, Paul knows, you're not made clean by eating kosher food, you're made clean by faith in Jesus. And as Paul brings Titus with him, he's like a living, walking test-case for the apostles in Jerusalem, isn't he. 'Guys, Titus loves Jesus like we do. He's put his faith in Jesus like we have. He's filled with the Spirit, like we are. Does he need to be circumcised to be acceptable to God?' And thankfully, they agree with Paul - he need's nothing more. Jesus has done it all.

Lamin Sanneh was professor of History and world Christianity at Yale, and he died last week. But he had an interesting story. He was born in Gambia to a muslim family, but became a Christian in his teens. And in one of his books, he argues that the reason Christianity has spread in Africa isn't because it imposes a Western culture on Africans - which is what academics have argued. It's the opposite. It's that Christianity has this power to enter any culture, and both critique and flex to that culture. Because unlike other religions it's not bound to any one culture. So you can be genuinely African, or Korean, or European, or whatever, and a Christian. Because it's not based on non-negotiable cultural distinctives. It's based on faith in Jesus.

And that means, that you and I can love and welcome the outsider, the one who's not like you, because you know that Jesus welcomed you when you were an outsider.

But fourthly, and finally, the gospel changes the way you see *the poor*. Paul tells us that the other apostles added nothing to his gospel, and agreed that test-case-Titus didn't need circumcising. But they did ask one thing. Verse 10: 'Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.'

Now, why make remembering the poor the one thing they wanted Paul to think about? Because the church in Jerusalem was suffering. Firstly, there was a famine, but secondly these Jewish Christians were probably being cut out of their families and potentially losing their jobs. While at the moment the gentile churches were more affluent. But look how Paul responds. Remembering the poor was 'the very thing I was eager to do.'

Why be eager to help the poor? Because at the heart of the gospel is God's grace - that when we were spiritually poor, God poured out his riches on us. That when we were spiritually naked, Christ clothed us.

You know, one of the problems with religion is that your motives are always questionable aren't they? If performance is your slave master, you'll either think that the poor are underserving, because they're underperforming, and you look down on them. Or you'll help them, but you won't really be doing it for them, but so that you look good to God or others. So, you give, but really it's to get.

But the gospel sets you free from looking down on others - because it humbles you and tells you you were poor and always underperforming, but God loved you anyway. And now you know you're not accepted because you give. You're accepted because of grace. And that means you can give and work for social justice for genuinely selfless motives: because God cares for the poor, because he cared for you when you were poor.

So, the gospel changes the way you see yourself. And it changes the way you see others. Because the gospel's not religion, it's a revelation of God's grace in Christ: to us, in us, and through us.