

Paul's Letter.¹ (slide.1)

It is our habit here at TCC to spend the fall months to looking at the Epistles. This fall, mostly Mark, but also Gabe and I will be walking through Paul's letter to the Galatians. In this letter, Paul underscores the freedom believers are to enjoy in the gospel, but at the same time he warns his readers against the temptation to supplement the gospel with human actions as a means of justification. Now this is not *merely* a first-century-Galatian temptation. No, as we'll see thru this series, this is *also* a twenty-first century temptation that we, knowingly or not, fall into as we rely on our feeble efforts to justify ourselves rather than rest on the sufficiency of Christ and His work on our behalf. Eva already read our text, so let's open by looking to the Lord in prayer.

(slide/black.2)

When we read the other letters written by the Apostle Paul, we almost always see him addressing see a wide range of topics. Take for example Paul's letter to the Corinthians. In it he discusses (slide.3) factions within the church, the wisdom of God versus human wisdom, the need for maturity, a touchy issue that required church discipline, lawsuits between believers, sex, gender, greed, drunkenness, marriage, divorce. *And that's in just the first seven chapters of the letter!* As we continue, Paul moves onto still other things (slide.4): food sacrificed to idols, the rights of an apostle, a history lesson on the people of Israel in the wilderness, the need for propriety in worship, teachings on the Lord's Supper, the nature of spiritual gifts, some more stuff about factions within the church, the question of whether or not Christians should speak in tongues, a few things about the kingdom of God, the resurrection of the dead, an offering that's being collected for some other churches, the call to brotherly love, and finally the names of a handful of people who want to say "hi." A lot of topics; a lot of stuff (slide/black.5).

Almost all of Paul's letters are like that. Maybe not all to the same degree, but pretty close. However, when we get to Paul's letter to the Galatians, the picture is (slide.6) very different. To be sure, other topics are discussed, but not many. And when they are discussed, they're usually discussed only briefly. Instead, the purpose/theme of this letter to the Galatians is singular. Paul's focus is almost exclusively on (slide.7) "his defense of the gospel."

Now it's interesting to see how Paul goes about doing this (slide/black.8). In a sense, he's not unlike a craftsman refinishing a piece of furniture: a careful removal of old layers of paint and wax; an equally careful sanding of the furniture followed by the application of wood conditioner, stain, and multiple coats of oil. Paul has a point to make. He wants to address it. But he goes about it slowly and carefully, through a wide variety of means: through theology, personal testimony, Bible stories, metaphors, allegory, common sense, and everyday examples.

Little by little, layer upon layer.

At times he's scholarly, didactic, and logical.

At other times he's encouraging, pastoral, and nurturing.

At still other times he's blunt and crass,

and says things we might never say in mixed company.

But the Apostle Paul doesn't care. He is willing to do anything and everything possible to defend the gospel of Jesus to these Galatian believers.

The Greeting.

As is his habit in all his letters, Paul (slide.9) opens with a greeting. He identifies himself and mentions his divine call as an apostle. He then acknowledges those who are with him and acknowledges the recipients of the letter (slide.10): "*the churches in Galatia.*" The region of Galatia (slide.11) was in what is now modern Turkey. Most hold that Paul is writing to the churches he and Barnabas established during their (slide.12) first missionary journey recorded as in Acts 13-14. This work began in AD 46 and lasted for about two years. It appears that Paul wrote this letter to these churches not long after that mission campaign—maybe a year later.² So after this initial greeting, Paul offers a blessing (slide.13); he writes:

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.

This is not a "boilerplate" blessing Paul wrote with ChatGPT. No, this is the golden thread that runs through Paul's entire letter; this is the operating truth that will shape everything he says—this idea of grace and peace that has been extended to the Galatian churches by the Father and Son, and the work of the Son who gave Himself for the sins of these Galatians so they might be delivered from that which imprisoned them.

But then, after that greeting, Paul does something odd (slide/black.14). You see, most of the time (in fact, just about all of the time) Paul uses the next part of his letters (this portion after his blessing) to offer a word of thanksgiving to the church he's writing to. He does so in order to let that particular congregation know how much he cares for them and how grateful to God he is for each of them. We look at his other letters (Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, etc.) and we see him saying things like:

I continue to thank God for you.

By His grace, you're demonstrating faithfulness.

By His gospel, you're staying steadfast to the truth.

*I'm constantly praying for you; I can't wait to see you again.*³

But in this letter to the Galatians, Paul says nothing like that—in fact, it's the complete opposite. Here's what he says (slide.15): *"I am astonished (slide.16)⁴ that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ."*

Paul is angry. He's not mildly indignant. He's not just working through a few issues. He's not simply getting a couple things off his chest. No, he's beside himself over what is happening in these Galatian churches.

Paul speaks especially of a (slide.17) "distortion" of the gospel. The word "distort" is probably not strong enough. The idea here speaks of something that has been (slide.18) "reversed" and "turned inside out."⁵ We later learn that this distortion came from the influence of outside teachers. Now here's the crazy thing: as we read on, it does not look like these outside teachers were denying the deity of Jesus, or His death on the cross, or the veracity of His resurrection. No, as best as we can tell, these teachers were not **subtracting** something from Paul's message. But they were **adding** something to it in order to "improve" the gospel.⁶ And for Paul those additions were enough, not only to *distort* the gospel, but, as we read, to turn it into a different gospel altogether. And the sad thing is that these Galatian churches lapped up this stuff that was being taught. It's like these churches took this gift/something good, and they somehow (slide.19) forgot how it worked. They took the good news that was meant to set them free and instead turned it into something strange and (in the end) into no gospel at all! (slide/black.20). And Paul is stubborn (slide.21) about this. In defending the gospel, he says (slide.22), *"But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed."* Paul is saying, "Look, if I show up tomorrow with my coworkers, and we preach another gospel, let a curse fall upon us. In fact, if even *an angel* shows up tomorrow—if even something like that shows up tomorrow and preaches another gospel, let that creature/angel be cursed." And then, just in case someone wasn't paying attention while this letter was being read, Paul says it again; he says (slide.23), *"As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let that person be accursed."*

The Audience of the Gospel.

Now (slide/black.24), as the letter unfolds, we learn that the "distortion" being taught by these outside teachers was sort of a modified form of Jewish legalism. Certain teachers showed up and said: "You need to obey the rituals, circumcise your sons, follow the dietary laws, honor the holy days, and only if you do those things will God accept you and bless you."⁷

Now you read that and you may be thinking, "Well, that's not my issue." And most likely it's not. Even if we eat a kosher diet and have our sons circumcised, it's unlikely that anyone here is doing these things in order to score points with God and curry His favor (maybe, but most likely not). Yet as we'll see over the course of our time in this letter, that does not mean that we should skip this epistle and move onto Paul's next letter—his letter to the Ephesians. No, instead, we're to employ what John Stott calls (slide.25), "a double listening." So what's "a double listening"? Stott argues that we are called to listen to the words of Scripture, and while doing so, we're to (slide.26) think of the setting and circumstances surrounding the original recipients of this letter, but at the same time we're to consider these same words (slide.27) through the lens of our contemporary world.⁸ And Stott argues that if we do that, and if we look and listen closely enough, we might realize that we too (at times) may also be guilty of distorting (or at least limiting) the gospel (slide/black.28).

So in what ways are we guilty of limiting the gospel? Let me mention two things. Number one, I think we can sometimes be guilty of limiting (slide.29) **the audience of the gospel**. You see, at times, I think we tend to think that the gospel is primarily for people who do not believe in Jesus—people who are not Christians. It's the idea that the gospel is (slide.30) *the milk*; it is the starting point. But if you wish to really grow in the faith, then you need to move from the

milk to the meat (to the deeper things of God.). It's the idea that the gospel is (slide.31) *the door*, it's the way you get in. But, again, if you wish to grow, then you need to move from the door to the path/street (to where the action is). But to think that way is a mistake (slide/black.32).

The gospel (the work of Jesus) is the milk, but it is also the meat.

The gospel is the door, but it's also the path.

It's not just the means by which we are saved (though it is),

It's also the means of our continued growth and transformation.

It is our justification; it is our sanctification.⁹

For those of us from a particular tradition (not all of you, but some of you),

It's not just the Sunday evening service that focused on evangelism;

It's also the Sunday morning service that focused on spiritual growth and maturity.

We sometimes forget that the gospel that *saves* us is also the gospel that *keeps* us. The gospel is central, not only at the *beginning* of our walk with Christ, but *throughout* our walk with Christ. It's more than the starting point (as if our only duty in life is to "get saved"). No, it is also that which sustains us. As Mark spoke of last week, the gospel is to encompass the *whole* of the Christian life and is to permeate everything we do and everything we are. This gift that was given; this love that was poured out. The gospel is not the "ABC" of the Christian faith, the gospel is the Christian faith from A-Z. It's the whole thing. This is why we sing the songs we sing; this is why we recite the creeds; this is why we take communion each week. We *begin* with the gospel, but we also *continue* with the gospel.

The Sufficiency of the Gospel.

So we can be guilty of limiting (slide.33) **the audience of the gospel**. Strongly related to this, we also be guilty of limiting (slide.34) **the sufficiency of the gospel** (the two ideas are connected). Like the churches in Galatia, there is the temptation for us to shrink the cross by finding other things we count on to give us a sense of personal credibility. And it's not that these things are necessarily bad (sometimes they are, but often they're not). No, the problem is not the things in themselves—it's *what we do with them*. The way we use them to bolster our feeling of validity/acceptance/good standing and how we might use these things to compare ourselves to others (slide/black.35).

"Because I'm a hard worker, God will reward me."

"Because I have good theology, God prefers me over those who don't."

"Because I do things right as a parent, I'm more godly than those who cannot control their kids."

"Because I'm self-disciplined/rigorous in my time management, I'm more mature than others."

We judge ourselves by our politics, or by the size of our bank account, or by our degrees, or by how tolerant we think we are, or how spiritual we imagine ourselves to be. And, while we might never admit it openly, these things can easily become the source of our pride and the source of our security. Furthermore, as we'll see with those in the Galatian churches, we can fall into what the sociologist, Robert Bellah called "the narcissism of similarity"—the idea whereby we huddle with those who think like us and exclude those who don't, and as a result, we turn even the church of Jesus into a high-school cafeteria with each faction/clique fully convinced that they (and they alone) are sitting at "the cool-kids table"¹⁰

There's a theologian, his name is Richard Lovelace. Lovelace spent most of his academic career as a professor of church history at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. In one of his books, here's what he writes; he notes that (slide.36):

Many professing Christians may have a theoretical commitment to the gospel, but in their day-to-day existence, they are drawing their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance, or the relative infrequency of their willful disobedience. **He goes on to say (slide.37):**

We must first make real to them the grace of God in accepting them daily, not because of their spirituality or their achievements in Christian service, but because God has accounted to them the perfect righteousness of Christ.¹¹

Do you see what Lovelace is saying? Our sole security/identity/assurance comes not from how well we happen to be doing this week, but from the gospel, from the work of Christ (slide/black.38). Do we trust in Christ and in the sufficiency of His gospel, or does our trust rest on our own capacity to earn God's favor by something else? I like how Tim Keller puts it in his study on the book of Galatians; he writes that (slide.39):

The gospel shows us that our spiritual problem is not only in failing to obey God, but also in relying on our obedience to make us fully acceptable to God, to ourselves, and to others. Every kind of character flaw comes from this natural impulse to be our own "savior" through our performance and achievement.¹²

Keller is saying that our primary concern must not be, *"What must I do to score points with the Almighty?"* But instead, *"What has He already done?"* (slide/black.40) And what did Christ do? He did everything. Francis Grimké put it best. Grimké was an American Presbyterian minister from a few generations ago; he wrote that (slide.41), *"It is only what is written upon the soul of man that will survive the wreck of time."*¹³ Nothing else makes us right. Nothing else can bear the weight of us as people made in the image and likeness of God (slide/black.42).

We're made alive and set free and made whole, not because we worked up the ability to comply with a set of rules (and certainly not because we pretend that the rules don't matter). We are made alive and set free and made whole because of the Redeemer we sang of today. The one whose priceless blood ransomed us. The one who paid the price and died in our place.

Try as we may, we can never save ourselves.
Instead, Christ, out of His deep love for us,
Was born so we might be born again.

Was broken so we might be made whole.

Was lifted on the cross so we might be redeemed.

And rose from the dead so we might live forever and rest in Him.

Let's pray.

¹ OT reading: Ps 96:1-6 (ESV).

² For a discussion on whether Paul is writing to the churches in northern Galatia or southern Galatia, see Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 1; John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, BST (Leicester/Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1968), 11.

³ See Rom 1:5-10; 1 Cor 1:4-9; Eph 1:15-23; Phil 1:3-8; Col 1:3-8, etc.

⁴ While Greek word used here can also be employed positively (e.g., Matt 8:10), this is obviously not at all Paul's intent here.

⁵ Timothy George, *Galatians*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 95.

⁶ G. Walter Hansen, *Galatians*, IVPNTC (Downers Grove/Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 37;

⁷ Scot McKnight, *Galatians*, NIVAC, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 24.

⁸ John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: Applying God's Word to Today's World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 186.

⁹ Timothy Keller, "Controversy" (sermon, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 1997).

¹⁰ Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1985), 72.

¹¹ Richard L. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal*, expanded edition (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1979, 2020), 101, 212.

¹² Timothy Keller, *Paul's Letter to the Galatians: Leader's Guide* (New York: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2010), intro.

¹³ Carter G. Woodson, *The Works of Francis J. Grimké* (Washington: The Associate Publishers, Inc., 1942), 2.