

The Epistle to the Galatians—The Gospel of Grace

Lesson 3: Devoted to Destruction (1:6-9)

“⁶I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. ⁸But 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. ⁹As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.” (ESV)

Have you ever had to make a call to someone (or meet them somewhere) for the express purpose of addressing a serious issue of sin in their life? That’s a difficult thing to do. It seems to be an impolite thing in our day and age to dare to be so involved in the life and growth of a brother or sister in Christ. By calling someone to repentance, to point someone to Christ, some may label us as “holier than thou”. Our culture assumes it to be the height of arrogance and condescension to move to correct someone. Our culture has adopted the worldview of “all roads leads to heaven” and “our truths may be different, but they’re our personal truths.”

Biblical Christianity knows no path to Heaven but through Christ. (Acts 4:12, John 14:6) Biblical Christianity known no truth other than the truth of God’s Word. (John 17:17) Therefore when a mature believer sees an immature believer (which sadly is not always correlated with how long someone has been saved) wandering from the truths of God, it is not loving to just “love” them along their own path towards God. It is in fact the most unloving thing to let someone continue on that path. The saints are to be in the business of maturing the saints. This is why God has designed the Church. He is the One who, **“gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.” (Eph. 4:11-14)**

The tone of Galatians is the tone of a mature believer, an Apostle of Jesus Christ, confronting a group of immature believers. Paul is writing a serious letter, and he’s getting right down to business. When you call that brother on the phone, or meet him for coffee, you don’t spend the first twenty minutes chatting about the weather, sports, and the kids. When your heart is heavy, and the elephant is in the room, the conversation quickly moves from “Hello” to “pay close attention to this loving direction”.

As I mentioned briefly last lesson, Paul skips the “I thank my God always for you” introduction that we are used to him saying after his typical salutation. (Note Rom. 1:8ff, 1 Cor. 1:4-8, and 1 Thess. 1:2-10) Instead Paul moves quickly, and sharply, into his astonishment that the Galatian church had so quickly uprooted themselves from the true gospel that was laid, and wandered off into all sorts of anti-gospel destruction. To Paul, it almost seemed as if the Galatians were devoted to destruction. This was a serious departure, and therefore Paul could find no reason to thank God for their faith, he actually just stood in bewilderment at their lack of faith. Was Paul shocked at the presence of false teachers in their midst? Of course not, Jesus warned many times that false teachers will always be present, which was echoed by Peter, and John, and others still. What amazed Paul, was how successful these false teachers

were in persuading them all, that they would be led astray from the faith in what could be called in today's age "a Guinness World Record" amount of time.

As a side note, a brief rabbit-trail if you would, consider the one who laid the foundation of this Galatian church. Paul is the one who laboured for the gospel among them, the same Paul who wrote half of the New Testament. Next to Jesus Christ Himself, could you have asked for anyone better? From our human vantage point, we tend to celebritize (if that's a word) people like MacArthur and Piper. If we weren't careful, we'd think that if MacArthur moved to Windsor and began preaching, that a mass revival would happen in Windsor, and that ten-thousand souls would come to Christ and sit under his preaching weekly. God could do that, but let's not lose focus that it's God alone who could do that. Without question, MacArthur is a gifted theologian, and God has accomplished much through John's ministry, but let's never conclude that the power is with John's tongue, or brain. The power is in Christ! God is the One who calls and saves people through various human agencies. The reality of the situation is that MacArthur isn't Christ, John doesn't command life from death. And although it might surprise you, there are people who stop attending his church regularly. Therefore, let it serve us as a reminder that even the Galatians who had the purest and most articulated teacher of gospel (save Christ) given to them in Paul, they still fell away quickly upon hearing it.

I also want to clarify, in case my wording has misled any you, that I am not calling the Galatians heretics. They had not forfeited their salvation, or completely turned their back on Christ. They were confused brothers-and-sister in Christ. They were weak-minded brothers who needed strengthening. They had "deserted" Christ (Gr. *metatithemi*). This word gives us the picture of a soldier who in the heat of battle cowers and retreats back to safety, leaving his fellow soldiers to fight alone and stand a greater risk of losing the battle. This type of desertion would have you dishonorably discharged from the military today, it would have been punishable by death in that day. This desertion therefore shouldn't be read as something that is passive.

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel" Who is the 'him' who called? Some have mistakenly understood that the 'him' is Paul, that Paul is astonished that they're so quickly deserting him, the one who first brought them to Christ. A biblical study on 'calling', and even a quick scan of the rest of the letter will help us to see clearly that God is the one who is calling sinners to Himself. Paul says in 1:15, **"But when He who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by His grace..."** He says later in the letter in 5:7-8, **"You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from Him who calls you."** Although not in this letter, Paul speaks of this calling as one element, one link in the golden chain of redemption in Romans chapter 8, **"And those whom he predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified..."** God Himself calls people. (Matt. 5:13, 10:1, 22:14) It's important then to understand that Paul is bewildered, not that they have deserting him, but deserted Jesus Christ so quickly.

It is a dangerous thing to abandon Christ, since there is no other way. There is no other gospel to run to. (Gal 1:7) To abandon the Gospel of free grace and run to the anti-gospel of salvation through works-righteousness will have permanent and disastrous results. Paul says in later in this letter in 5:4, **"You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace."** The Galatians had strayed from the message of "Jesus paid it all", and had turned to a "different gospel" that began with "Jesus" and added circumcision as well as the keeping of the Mosaic law for salvation. The

Judaizers who were the source behind this perversion of the gospel were men who claimed to be followers of Christ. And like all false teachers, they had just enough truth in their message to convince those who were not rooted in proper theology. These Judaizers must have recognized Christ as the long awaited Messiah, and they must have placed some high priority, or large emphasis on the death, burial and resurrection of Christ for the sins of those who would believe. Their message contained just enough truth to sound plausible, but their message was a distortion of the truth that choked out grace. Once the Galatians deserted Jesus Christ who called them by His grace, what more could they turn to then a hopeless religion of works-righteousness before God? The Galatians began **“by the Spirit”** and were now trying to be **“perfected by the flesh”**. (Gal. 3:3) Paul repeats his astonishment later in the letter in 4:8-11, **“Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.”** It stupefied Paul that the Galatians would turn to another gospel, not that there is another one...

(v.7) **“Not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.”**

There is only one gospel. There can be varying messages, but there cannot be varying gospels. Paul is making a bold statement that there is no hope in following the Judaizers. Paul says that there are “some” who trouble you, Fung writes, *“the vague reference does not indicate ignorance on his part of their identity but rather disdain for the. The effect of their activity was to raise seditions among the Galatians, causing their allegiance to the gospel which they had receive from Paul to be shaken.”*¹

The Judaizers aimed at taking the Galatians to a better understanding of Christianity. These false teachers knew the gospel that Paul had given to this young church and they consciously chose to “distort the gospel of Christ”. They weren’t attempting to bring the Galatians to deeper and greater understanding and application of the true gospel, they were replacing the gospel with a new teaching. They weren’t introducing an interesting modification to the true gospel, they were intentionally distorting it.

(v.8) **“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.”**

In this verse we again find Paul’s sharp tone, he is using very strong language. “But” is the strong adversative word *alla*. That strong word would have been felt by the original reader. It showed how serious Paul was in this letter as he considered the significance of the true gospel in comparison to the false gospel before them. “We” carries with it so much emphasis that is somewhat lost in translation in English. The word “we” is preceded by *kai ean*, which speaks of an extreme case, that is highly unlikely. In English we read the words “But even if we”, but they would have understood something like, “There is virtually no possibility that you will ever hear me, or any other preacher like me preaching a different gospel than the one we said at first.” Paul goes even further than his own apostolic authority, and appeals to the authority of an angel, to solidify his point that no one has the authority to deviate from the message of the cross and pervert the gospel of Christ. The Jews believed, as the scriptures teach in

¹ Fung, Ronald Y.K., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: Galatians* Eerdmans p.45

both Testaments, that angels were involved in the giving of the law. At Sinai, where Moses was given the law, Psalm 68:17 gives us a clue, **“The chariots of God (angels) are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands; the Lord is among them; Sinai is now in the sanctuary.”** The New Testament teaches this also in Acts 7:38, **“This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers.”** Then later in verse 53, **“You who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”** Hebrews 2:2, **“For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable...”** Because of this belief, the Judaizers may have been heavy-handed upon keeping the ceremonies and traditions of the Old Covenant, as they were to obey the word given from angels. Thus Paul appeals to the angels. “Even if an angel flies down and preaches another gospel than the one I was entrusted to tell you, let that angel be accursed!” F.F. Bruce said, *“The gospel preached by Paul isn’t the true gospel because Paul preached it, it’s the true gospel because the risen Christ gave it to Paul to preach.”*² It’s the message that’s important, not the messenger.

Verse 8 is hypothetical language. Paul is saying hypothetically, “If I, or angel, or your best friend, or your Grandmother, or the tree in the front yard somehow comes to life and speaks a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, they deserve to go to hell, let them be accursed!” In verse 9, Paul repeats himself, but this time he speaks in actuality, **“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 him be accursed.”** A double curse at the end of verses 8 and 9. They are to be “accursed”, literally “anathema”. To be ‘anathema’ is to be set apart by God for destruction. Paul would consider even himself damned to hell if he ever spoke a word contrary to the gospel he was entrusted with. The Apostle John similarly warns believers of the certain reality of false teachers, and how we are to handle them in 2 John, **“For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist...If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching (the true gospel), do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.”** (7, 10-11)

“As we have said before, so now I say again” refers to the first visit he had with the Galatians, he’s not referring to what he just said in verse 8. We know this because of the adverb *arti* (**now**), which refers to a designation of time. In another words, he’s telling them that he still affirms everything that he told them at the beginning, because the gospel never changes. It’s just like Jude says in verse 3, **“Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”** The gospel is given to us once for all. And therefore the message never changes. If the redemption found in Christ alone has ever been true for sinners, it will always be good true for sinners. This is the repetition that Paul has in mind in verse 9, he’s still telling them the old, old story, of Jesus and His love.

Believers are to be growing in the Lord, which involves a steady intake of God’s Word within a church context. Believers are also responsible to search the scriptures to ensure that the teaching before them is biblical. No Christian ought to remain under errant, even blasphemous preaching and teaching. We are warned to stay away from error and to concentrate on the truth of God’s Word. We are not to tolerate the distortion of the gospel that happens much in our day. Let us like Paul fight for the purity of the gospel.

² F.F. Bruce, *Epistle to the Galatians*, p. 83