

The Epistle to the Galatians: The Gospel of Grace

Lesson 4: Apostolic Credentials (1:10-24)

Let's start with a story. It's a warm Saturday afternoon, not a cloud in the sky. You've decided to take a relaxing drive out into the country. Everything seemed so peaceful, until suddenly a vehicle comes storming up behind you. Your hairs start to stand on end, because you can tell that this vehicle isn't just speeding, but it's speeding up to you! Now the vehicle moves into the passing lane and comes up alongside your driver's door yelling, "Pull over! Pull over!" Now you're really starting to get nervous, until you realize you recognize the voice...Brad Thompson?!?! Oh, it's Brad! So you pull over. Brad gets out of his vehicle and walks up to you, "Licence and registration please." "Hi Brad. You're funny, what's up?" Brad looks stern, "I'm not trying to be funny. Did you know your tail light is out? Give me your licence and registration please."

That story is ridiculous! Brad has no authority to pull people over and issue traffic tickets. And everyone knows that Brad doesn't work! All teasing of Brad aside (I love you brother), we all know that every authority comes from one source, and is represented by appointed people by that authority. If I go to Boston Pizza tonight for dinner and fall victim to the worst service and food I've ever experienced at a restaurant before, I can't fire the staff. At work tomorrow, if I'm not pleased with the policies or procedures of my employer, I'm not free to alter those things. Imagine what chaos sporting events would be if there were no referees, and every player played according to their own rules.

This is the idea of the problem in Galatia. Judaizers, who were not the appointed authority, were claiming to be the authority, and drawing the Galatian Christians away from the true authority, and into a perverted one. They are what Paul was warning when he wrote the Corinthians, **"And what I do I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds."** (2 Cor. 11:12-15) The question being raised was concerning the apostolic credentials of Paul. Why was Paul changing the message? Was he really to be trusted? Was his word greater than their interpretation of the Old Testament? Paul *will* assert his divine, apostolic authority and defend it in our text for this lesson.

Verse 10, **"For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ."**

The opponents of Paul were doing all that they could to discredit his teaching. Perhaps they were slandering him by saying that Paul was all for circumcision and the Mosaic Law when he appealed to Jewish crowds, but that he dropped the whole thing in order to appeal to the Gentile crowds. Perhaps they were misrepresenting, misunderstanding, and misquoting Paul in order to stir up doubt in the hearts of the Galatians. We know from the second Corinthian letter that there were those who slandered Paul by pointing out how he was strong in writing, and weak in person! They were doing all that they could to show inconsistency and sprout doubt in the people's mind. (cf. 2 Cor. 10:1-11) These accusations completely missed the point of Paul's ministry. He clarified it already in the first Corinthian letter, **"To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those**

outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.” (1 Cor. 9:20-23) Paul was always inconveniencing himself in order to bring the gospel to the world. Certainly, there comes a point where you have to meet people where they are in order to reach them, while not compromising your witness of Christ. Consider how effective a missionary would be who entered into a foreign land filled with people who had never heard of Christ, and spoke English to them, while dressed in our clothing. No one would listen to him, no one would understand him. It is profitable for him to learn the language and culture of the people he wishes to meet, so that he can meet them where they are, and not offend them before he gives them the gospel, which is offensive enough to the sinful heart already.

Paul knew that his name was slandered. He knew that some thought of him as a people pleaser at all costs. There is a correlation in verses 9 and 10 with the word “now”, he making another bold statement, and bringing the Galatians up to date on his concern to please men. Verse 9, **“now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.”** Verse 10, **“For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God?”** To paraphrase, *“People say that I all I care about is converts, and I change my message like the weather? How about this: If anyone believes and preaches anything other than the gospel that was entrusted to me by God, let him go to hell? There! Do you think I’m trying to please everyone now?”*

There was a time when in Paul’s life (when he was Saul), that he cared a great deal about what people thought of him. He says in Galatians 1:14, **“And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people.”** Philippians 3:4-6, **“Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else think he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”** There was a time when Paul lived for all of that religious achievement, and public acclaim, which amounted to nothing more than hopelessness. Paul was struck with the same gospel, the same good news of Jesus Christ that he preached to others. He left his Pharisaical life behind and followed Jesus Christ. He stopped trying to please anyone else, and sought to please Christ with his all. Paul didn’t care any longer what people thought of him. Paul placed honouring Christ through the proclamation of the gospel above his own reputation, safety, and life.

The question that I pose to you this morning is: Who are you pleasing with your life? Man, or God? There are some who will think to themselves, “I don’t care what anyone thinks of me!” Now I believe that many have gone too far with that thinking into pride and all sorts of foolishness. There are some people who march to the beat of their own drum, and it’s like talking to a wall to get them to see their error. We don’t want to be like that. It’s the height of pride to think that no one could ever assess our lives and point out sin, and direct us towards Christlikeness in that area. But let me address those who think that they aren’t guilty of being a people-pleaser. True, you may do your own thing, and not care who likes you, or dislikes you. But one thing that you’ll not fail in doing is pleasing yourself! It’s as Paul meant in Ephesians 5:29, that no one hates their own body. So, while you may not be a people-pleaser, you a person, and you seek your own pleasure. My point is that we are both living for the true gospel and pleasing Christ, or we are living for another gospel and pleasing man (even if that man is ourselves).

What is the gospel? What does the good news say about pleasing God? Does it say that we must muster up all of our strength and concentration in an effort to appease, and therefore please, an angry God? The gospel is that God is *already* pleased with us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This places us in a new and unusual position before both God and Man. We are already in a position where God is pleased with us in Christ, so we don't have to work for that standing. And being a possessor of the gospel message, we are liberated from attempting to please men with some tailored message. Our message never was intended to bring them comfort and ease. It's a message that will bring them ultimate satisfaction and joy at no cost, and yet it will cost them everything! The good news is that the work is complete, there is no earning left to do on our part. The cost comes from being a representative of Jesus Christ in the same world of people who murdered Him. It was Jesus who proclaimed, **"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."** (Matt. 10:34-39)

Paul knew that he couldn't serve two masters. Serving Man and Christ is incompatible. They are mutually exclusive terms. Note the word "still" that Paul uses at the end of verse 10. He's talking about his pre-converted lifestyle, when he wasn't a pleaser of God. He was now under an exclusive loyalty to Jesus Christ alone, and His gospel.

Verse 11, **"For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel."**

It's almost like Paul could see into the future. There have been some throughout the centuries who have hand-picked which verses of the Bible are applicable. This is one of the issues that I have with a red-letter Bible. While it is convenient to find words that Jesus spoke in red, every word of scripture is inspired by God and profitable to us. (2 Tim. 3:16) Just as there are some who place a higher emphasis on the words in red, there have been some to have disregarded the words of the Paul altogether. Paul has been viewed by some (although no major denomination today teaches this) to have ruined Christianity, by turning it from a religion of beauty and purity into a heavy-laden, legalistic religion. Paul was careful to affirm to the reader that this message of his is God's message. That his words are God's words. His wording **"For I would have you know"** (gnorizo) is a verb that means to make something known with certainty. He was literally certifying his message as the authentic message from God. Paul was making it crystal clear that he didn't invent this gospel, nor did he alter some other gospel, but he was preaching the only, authentic, authoritative gospel which he received himself from Christ.

Verse 12, **"For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ."**

I find the similarity between the Judaizers of that time, and the Roman Catholic religion to be staggering. The Judaizers were those who memorized their own writings instead of the scriptures, and literally everything that they knew, was taught to them through the rabbinical traditions. Rather than studying the scriptures, they read the religious interpretation of men to gain insight. The Roman Catholic religion is just the same. Not only do they teach a damning, false gospel of works-righteousness, but they are

also a people who are lost in a sea of traditions, papal decrees, and papal encyclicals. All that they know, do, and believe is a compilation of things that their leadership has invented and brought into the liturgical worship throughout the centuries.

Paul did not receive this gospel through any man. He didn't learn the gospel from the religious men around him. He didn't learn it through the study of theologians that had lived and died before him. He didn't learn of the gospel from the rest of the apostles. He received this gospel directly from Jesus Christ by revelation. This is not the only time that Paul referenced his receiving something directly from the Lord. Every month when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we read 1 Corinthians 11:23 where Paul wrote, **"For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you..."** IOW, the Lord's Supper wasn't Paul's invention, or someone else's good idea, it was revealed to Paul in order that he might deliver it to the church. Paul echoes his receiving the gospel directly from the Lord in 1 Cor. 15:1-11. In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, he underscored how the message that he proclaimed was to be received not as his words, but as God's Word, **"And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers."** (1 Thess. 2:13)

Not only is it important for us to understand that Paul received this gospel directly by revelation from Christ, but it's also important for us to understand that Paul didn't learn the gospel. We learn the gospel by studying scripture through sitting under regular preaching/teaching and personal study, and prayer for illumination. We piece together the truths of God's Word over the years. Depending upon our backgrounds, some of us have more difficulty than others when it comes to grasping certain doctrines from scripture. Paul had no such learning curve. His road to Christ began on the road to Damascus to destroy the church when he was encountered by the risen Christ, converted, and re-commissioned by the Lord Himself. Sent on his way to see Ananias (Acts 9:10-19), even Ananias was not instrumental in teaching Paul the gospel. The gospel was given to Paul by Christ Himself, in such a way that Paul understood with great clarity the message that he was about to proclaim to all believers. For those of you who may be hesitant to believe that God can impart such an understanding all at once into the mind of a person, let us not underestimate the power of a God who created the universe and all things in it. God can do whatever He pleases. If He wanted to impart such knowledge to all of us that way He could have, but that is not the way He has desired His word to be spread. But Paul's experience of direct and concentrated illumination is not solitary, the apostles themselves shared a similar experience. Jesus promised the apostles in John 14:26, **"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."** Just a few chapters later in John 16:13-15, Jesus again promised, **"When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth, for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for He will take what is Mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has in Mine; therefore I said that He will take what is Mine and declare it to you."** The Apostles were unable to connect the dots while they were with Christ. We see them throughout the gospels seeking clarification from Christ concerning what He said, or what He meant. We see how the priorities of the Apostles were all mixed up, arguing over who would be first in the Kingdom. We see how they all abandoned Christ at a critical moment when they figured they'd stand up for Him the most. Yet, at the appointed time, the promised Holy Spirit came and cemented in their minds all the lessons that they had learned from Christ Himself. This is the same style of revelation that Paul himself shared.

Verses 13-14, **“For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And 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.”**

How had the Galatians heard of Paul’s former life in Judaism? There’s a few ways, and they’re probably all true. One way that they likely knew of ‘Saul of Tarsus’ was by reputation. People talk, and most assuredly would have been warned of the man who now preaches the name he once tried to eliminate. Another way that people would have heard about ‘Saul’ is from those who were constantly trying to tear Paul down. Everywhere Paul went he impacted people. Let me clarify that statement: Everywhere the gospel goes, it impacts people. The gospel either brings people to Christ, or it intensifies their hatred of Christ. The gospel never finds a person in a neutral position, and it certainly doesn’t leave someone in a neutral position. So, wherever Paul went, people came to Christ, and many people grew in their hatred of Christ. The more Paul preached, the more danger and hostility he faced. People were always trying to discredit his message, and so it natural that people would speak of the man he once was. But probably the most likely source that the Galatians had in learning about Paul’s former life was Paul himself. I can just imagine Paul sharing his testimony of conversion over and over again, and testifying to God’s grace to save such a sinner as him. Here a man dead-set to destroy the Christian faith (in the name of protecting God’s name and His people) is met face-to-face with the God he is persecuting—and is not destroyed himself—but saved and commissioned to serve this God.

Paul’s former life was a remarkable one to be sure. Paul’s pedigree was impeccable. His intelligence was high. His drive was strong. He was what we could call a “go-getter”, an accomplisher. When it came to the Jewish religion that he loved and practiced, he excelled more than any in his generation. A little clarification is good for us where Paul says that he advanced more than many of his **‘own age’**. Paul is not limiting his advancement to only those of his own age group. He is claiming his advancement beyond many in that present age. Saul’s zeal for the ancestral traditions of the Jewish religion was quite remarkable. Everyone would have known the name of Saul from Tarsus.

Paul remarks about his zeal for the traditions of the fathers in Judaism. What is significant about this is that Paul was not referring to the Old Testament necessarily. There certainly was a passing down of God’s Word as revealed through Moses and the Prophets both verbally and written that the Jews placed a value upon. But there was further ancestral traditions that the Pharisees of the past had added on top of the Word, which many times contradicted God’s Word. To be exact, the Pharisees had added 613 further commandments that were to be followed to achieve and maintain a proper standing before God. 248 of the commands were positive, meaning things that they were to do. The other 365 commands were things that they were to abstain from. These were the traditions that Saul referred to as being zealous of. For every Pharisee, life was maintaining the balance of living according to both the written law and these oral traditions. It was these oral traditions that Jesus challenged the Pharisees with in Matthew 15:1-9. Let us also further read Mark 7:1-13.

One thing remained for sure, Paul’s life in Judaism was one of works righteousness. It was a life that was prided in strict adherence to the written law and oral traditions. And in Paul’s mind, if anyone had reason to boast, it was him. (cf. Phil. 3:4ff) Saul already took offence at the message of Christianity because it undercut the message of the Jewish religion that he promoted. The message that Christ died a sacrificial, substitutionary death for sinners, and resurrected, conquering death and sealing up a sure victory of sin was a death-blow to Saul’s Jewish message. The Christians were preaching a message of

faith alone, in Christ alone, according to scripture alone, by God's grace alone, all the glory of God alone! Saul was not going to stand for such apparent heresy. He already saw that the message of the Christians stood at odds with his message. This was Paul's former life. This is what God had saved him out of.

Verses 15-17, **"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, in order that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus."**

Verse 15 begins with the contrasting word "but". Paul is drawing the dividing line between his old life in Judaism, and his new life in Christ. Saul was heading in the direction of Damascus to persecute Christians, but he was stopped in his tracks. He encountered the living Christ, and his life took a turn in the complete opposite direction (I'm speaking figuratively, not geographically). Saul encountered the omnipotent. He encountered the Sovereign. He encountered the Master. He encountered his Creator.

What this told Paul, and us, is that God is one who necessarily must move in order for us to be saved. By very definition of the word 'saved', we admit our helpless state prior to salvation. The salvation of any person is always and only the result of God's sovereign will to save. Those who are saved are **'set apart'** as we read in our text, literally they are 'made holy'. They are those whom God has chosen to place a special, saving affection upon. I want you to note the timing of God's 'setting apart' of Paul where he writes **"before I was born"**. While this statement is accurate, it's not quite detailed enough. Paul goes even further in Ephesians 1:4 to write that **"He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world."** The point that Paul is making by including the timing of the decision of the Father to save him *prior* to his birth is to say that Paul's former life as Saul had nothing positively or negatively to do with it. That's not how God chooses who He saves. Paul had nothing at all to do with his salvation. Not only was he not looking for Christ, he was looking to rid the world of any remaining followers of Christ. Paul was chosen to be an apostle long before he was born. This manner of selection isn't an isolated event in scripture either, another example is found in Romans 9 with Jacob and Esau, the twins. Romans 9:11-13, **"though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of Him who calls—she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.'"** As it is written, **"Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."** Isaiah the prophet says of himself in 49:1, **"The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother He named my name."** The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah saying, **"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."** (Jer. 1:5)

Salvation is of the Lord. He is the lover of our souls. He is the one who graciously moves in on the sinner and calls him to servanthood. God is one who at the appointed time revealed himself to Saul on that Damascus road and saved him. The outcome of this encounter would result in a new name for Saul, a new life, a new perspective, a new mission. Paul was saved to **'preach Him among the Gentiles'**. The same calling that he gives to everyone that he calls. There is not one Christian to whom the Great Commission given by Jesus at the close of the gospel of Matthew does not apply. Peter details the purpose of our sanctified lives this way, **"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."** This is what all Christians do! We 'witness' to others about Christ. We tell them what we have seen and read and heard. We proclaim the good news to a lost world.

Following this salvific encounter, Paul records that he didn't '**immediately consult with anyone**'. To whom would Paul go to receive further or clearer instruction? It's not as though Jesus was manifesting himself to many people all at the same time. Paul had experienced something unique. No one shared this encounter, no one else knew the mind and will of God for Paul, and so there was no purpose in seeking their counsel. Next Paul records that he also didn't '**go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me**'. We need to keep in mind that Jerusalem was the mecca of religion. It was the headquarters of religious doctrine. It would have almost seemed necessary for Paul to take his experience to Jerusalem and tell it to the apostles. But that's not where Paul went. Instead, he '**went away into Arabia**'. We just can't be dogmatic as to when he left for Arabia, or when he '**returned again to Damascus**' because it's not recorded for us in the book of Acts. Nor can we pinpoint where in a broad landscape of Arabia he went. We simply don't know why Paul went to Arabia, or for how long, but I personally believe he took some time to pray and collect his mind and strength before beginning his new journey. Let's be sure to remember how Paul is underlining how he didn't meet up with anyone at this time, not even the apostles. Paul is being clear that the salvation that he had, and the gospel that he preached, came from God alone.

Verses 18-20, "**Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!)**"

Within the context of this letter, it's safe to interpret Paul's timing of three years later to mean three years after his conversion. It's then that Paul finally makes his way to Jerusalem to visit Peter (Cephas, cf. John 1:42). It shouldn't surprise us that Paul sought out this leading apostle, although his visit was short, lasting only fifteen days. We are given some insight into this visit in the account of Acts 9:26ff where we hear that the apostles were afraid of him.

Paul wrote that he saw no one else except for James, the Lord's brother. The only problem is that James wasn't an apostle. So what did Paul mean? Homer Kent gives us clarification, "*Thus Paul is understood to say that he saw no other apostle than Peter, but he did see one additional leading figure in Jerusalem, namely, James the Lord's brother. But he could be termed an apostle only in the wider sense of those who were close associates of the Twelve. He is mentioned here because of his prominence in Jewish Christianity.*" (The Freedom of God's Sons, p.47)

So Paul makes his point clear that he had a short visit in Jerusalem where he spent time with Peter and James only. Then he qualifies what he just said with an emphatic, "I'm not lying!" Why does he need to say this? I think it's clear that Paul is still defending not only the legitimacy of the gospel he is preaching, but also the divine source of it. He is dotting every 'i' and crossing every 't' so that no one will get the impression that Paul's gospel is the compilation of the apostle's thoughts and motives. Paul was also noting that the only two people that he had contact with were both Jewish, so even if his accusers were right in saying he was influenced by them, they certainly wouldn't have influenced him *away* from the Mosaic Law!

Verses 21-24, "**Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.**"

Paul's visit to Jerusalem was cut short as the account in Acts 9 tells us. He began to preach the name of Jesus boldly, speaking the gospel and disputing with the Hellenists (Greek speaking Jews). The Hellenists sought to kill Paul, and so as Acts 9:30 tells us, the brother Christians brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

This is the parallel to where we are in this letter to the Galatians. From Jerusalem Paul is going into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, two regions which at that moment in history combined to form one imperial province. The section of the province known as Cilicia was divided into two halves (East and West), the Eastern half (Cilicia Pedias) is where Tarsus was located. The same Tarsus that the brothers sent him too in Acts 9:30, the same Tarsus where Paul was born and raised. These areas would be the center of Paul's evangelical ministry for what is recorded in Gal. 2:1 as fourteen years. During these fourteen years, he was still **"unknown in person"** or 'by sight' **"to the churches of Judea that are in Christ."** These churches of Judea were most likely small gatherings of believers in Christ who were scattered across Judea, under tremendous persecution and danger for their faith in Christ. What is meant for us to understand is that for this entire period that Paul was in Syria-Cilicia, he never went and presented himself to these churches as a preacher of the gospel. And from that we can conclude Paul's point that for the entire fourteen year duration, he had no affiliation with the leaders in Jerusalem, the apostles, or had any other religious influence from that region.

Verse 23 continues to build Paul's case. Although Paul had not known the believers in Judea, they knew Paul, if by nothing more than reputation. Everyone knew about Saul of Tarsus, but now the news kept slowly trickling in about Paul in Tarsus preaching the gospel. While the apostle's first reaction to Paul's conversion was fear, the brothers in Judea learned to rejoice all the more as the news kept coming wave after wave. **"And they glorified God because of me."** The imperfect tense in the Greek gives us the meaning that they kept on praising God for Paul's salvation and gospel ministry, over and over again. The news of their rejoicing also tells us something about the sovereign work of God in Paul, that Paul would be preaching a gospel that was in accord with what the believers in Judea believed, though they did not know each other. It also tells us that the believers are preaching the one, true gospel. The Judaizers whom Paul opposed were not the source and standard of truth, they were the ones who had deviated from the truth of God and began to preach a lie.

In summary, the entire conclusion of Galatians 1 is meant to show us that Paul had never been subordinate to the Jerusalem leaders. He did not owe his ministry, his evangelistic zeal, his apostolic authority, or even the message of the gospel to them. He owed it all to the God who breathed new life into him on that Damascus road, the God who revealed Himself to Paul in Jesus Christ.