

The Epistle to the Galatians: The Gospel of Grace

Lesson 5: Apostolic Commendation (2:1-10)

In this section of Paul's letter, he is continuing to build his case for authority. While he spent the tail-end of chapter one writing about his independence of all influence from Jerusalem and its leaders, as well as the apostles, in this chapter he continues to make his point but shifts his focus. At this point in the letter Paul now authenticates his message by comparing it to the gospel message preached by other prominent church figures. Although these various men that he will mention all came to saving faith in Christ independently (at different times and in different places), although God revealed himself to each one of them independently, they preach identical messages. The purpose of his case is again to combat the false teachers (the Judaizers) who were attempting to tear down Paul's reputation, and show him to be a lone soldier. The Judaizers wished to present Paul as a man with a personal agenda, a self-appointed man of God with a brand new, creative, persuasive, and problematic message. Paul has countered by making the case that his revelation directly from God, apart from any human influence, and yet it matched what those other men of God spoke.

Verses 1-2, **"Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running or had not run in vain."**

It's been fourteen years at this time since the Damascus road encounter. Paul is now making his way **"to Jerusalem"**. Some scholars believe that the nature of his visit was to attend the Jerusalem council, as recorded in Acts 15 which was called in order to resolve the issue of the need for Jewish circumcision for salvation by Gentiles. The problem was that the Jews were coming out of Judea, and were preaching a false message to Gentile Christians, saying **"Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."** (Acts 15:1) The argument is that the new teaching was well known to Paul and Barnabas, and so they made their way up to Jerusalem in order to debate their case for the gospel.

Our text tells us that Paul and Barnabas were not alone on this journey recorded in Galatians 2, but they took Titus along with them. Titus was very dear to Paul, when he wrote to him later in NT, he called Titus, **"my true child in a common faith."** (Titus 1:4) The group going up to Jerusalem in Galatians certainly fits with the account in Acts 15:2, **"And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question."** But there are some clues in the text that point *against* this visit to Jerusalem as being the Jerusalem Council visit recorded in Acts 15.

There are four inscripturated visits by Paul to Jerusalem. The first is recorded in Acts 9:26-30, mentioned by Paul in Galatians 1:18-19 where he met briefly with Peter. So obviously this isn't the account of fourteen years later in Galatians 2. The fourth visit is his last visit where he was arrested and sent to Rome in Acts 21-28, clearly this isn't the visit either. The debate is between the second and third visit. The second visit is recorded in Acts 11, where Paul brought the poor a gift during their severe famine. And the third visit is the Jerusalem Council visit in Acts 15.

I believe the visit in Galatians 2 to be famine visit of Acts 11, as I've already mentioned briefly in our introductory lesson. There are clues within our text that help me make this conclusion. The first clue is

that Paul went because of a revelation. According the account in Acts 15, they were “**appointed to go up Jerusalem**” (15:2) which is not consistent with our text. However, the famine visit was sparked in response to what Agabus “**foretold by the Spirit** (revelation) **that there would be a great famine over all the world.**” (11:28) Also, the account before us says that Paul went up and spoke “**privately before those who seemed influential**” which is inconsistent from his Jerusalem Council visit which was very public. Another reason to lean towards the famine visit is chronological. Paul has been recording his autobiography up to this point, speaking about his conversion, and then his first trip up to Jerusalem, why would he then skip an important second trip and speak about the third? Another reason for concluding that this account is speaking of the second “famine” visit is logical. Because Paul is settling the issue in this letter concerning the matter of circumcision and its necessity for salvation, wouldn’t Paul have descriptively referenced the Jerusalem Council which finally settled the matter? But he doesn’t even mention the Council, which would have solidified his case and proved the issue a dead point. My final concluding reason is Paul’s stated purpose of his visit in verse 10, “**Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.**” This verse fits like a puzzle piece to the Acts 11 account. All of these reasons combined are my case for the Acts 11 “famine” visit. I certainly haven’t solved the case, there are many before me who are infinitely more skilled in the scriptures who disagree with me. This is where I have settled on the issue, maybe I have settled it in your mind too. I want to remind you of the Paul’s purpose in mentioning the “revelation” that brought him back to Jerusalem fourteen years later: He was making it clear that his message, and the direction of his path came from the Lord alone.

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?

So, going up to Jerusalem with a gift for the poor during their severe famine, Paul brought Barnabas and Titus. What I find interesting about Paul bringing along of Titus was his tact. While Paul and Barnabas were both Jews, Titus was a Greek Christian convert. Titus would eventually become the Pastor of the church in Crete. Bringing Titus would have been a bold statement. Bringing someone who Paul considered to be a son in the faith, someone who was uncircumcised, would have been done almost intentionally to enrage the Judaizers. Circumcision meant everything to the Jews, it was the very symbol of their salvation. According to their interpretation of the OT law, if a Gentile wanted to become a Jew, he had to be circumcised. But then came Jesus, and on the heels of his death, suddenly his followers began preaching this message of law-free gospel grace. Suddenly came a message of a resurrected Christ who was the Saviour of sinners. Suddenly there was a message of one who perfectly obeyed the law in the place of us who couldn’t. Suddenly the message was circulating that faith in the risen Christ alone saved! And Paul brought Titus as living proof that a Gentile could believe that message and be saved apart from being a circumcised Jew.

When Paul went up and spoke privately before those who seemed influential during this famine visit, they accepted Titus as a believer. Paul wrote in 2:3, “**But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek.**” Paul is therefore underlining the point that the gospel of free grace was understood also by these people. They saw no need to super-impose the Jewish law upon Titus, they saw him as a fellow believer in Christ, as a fellow recipient of His grace.

Paul speaks of those he met with as being “**those who seemed influential.**” (2:2,6) Not understanding the way people spoke in that day, we might conclude that Paul was talking down to these people. But we need to understand the point that he is making. We need to remember that the Judaizers were making a huge deal about the Jerusalem apostles, as though they vastly outranked Paul and any of his

crazy ideas. Paul's response is simply, **"What they were makes no difference to me; God show no partiality."** (2:6) So what were the apostles? They were simply those common folks who were given the grace to walk alongside of Christ for three years. And in hindsight, they were those who misunderstood Jesus regularly. They were always asking Him to clarify what He said back there. It wasn't until the Holy Spirit illuminated them that things started to solidify in their minds. They were ordinary men, who were chosen by God to be the first to carry this gospel to the world. Paul didn't have the same experience as them. He wasn't one of the original dozen. But this is what he says about the apostles, *"What they are makes no difference to me, they're not on a higher level than me. God doesn't love them any more than me."* So, we shouldn't interpret Paul's language as disrespectful towards them. If anything, Paul had tremendous respect for them. But Paul wasn't intimidated by them. For Paul, truth was truth, and they both spoke the same truth.

I've attempted to underline Paul's reinforcement of his divine calling and direction in his life—apart from any other human relation or influence as we've gone along in this study. In verse 6 he says it again, **"Those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me."** In other words, Paul wasn't looking for anyone's stamp of approval, he already had God's sending approval. But just because he wasn't looking for their approval doesn't mean that he didn't get it. Verses 7-10 tell us that they wholeheartedly thoughts of Paul as a brother and partner in the advance of the gospel, **"they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me"**. The apostles "added nothing" to Paul's message, meaning that Paul's gospel message aligned harmoniously with theirs. The term goes beyond adding to his message. It's the idea that they didn't add, take away, edit, or altogether change portions of his message.

The apostles stood alongside of Paul as partners in ministry. They thought of themselves correctly as a united frontline of the gospel. Although they were different people, taking the gospel to different people, they were nevertheless working towards the same end of advancing the kingdom of Christ. The goal remained the same: Make and mature disciples of Christ, and see repentant sinners become gospel-preaching saints. Notice the commendation that they had of each other. We don't see rivalry, or jealousy, or slander in this group. We don't see fighting for pre-eminence in the church. We see friendship, and a spirit of unity towards the end of glorifying the name of Jesus Christ. We see Paul commending Peter (v.8) and James and John (v.9). And we read of their commendation of Paul after he **"set before them the gospel that [he] proclaimed among the Gentiles"** (v.2). Verse 7 records, **"When they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised."** Notice what they saw. The apostle knew the work of God in a man when they saw it.

There is a great lesson that we can take from the example of these men in this chapter. What kind of cooperation are we actively involved in within this church? Do we consider ourselves to be someone who is working diligently alongside of our brothers and sisters in this church for the advancement of the gospel? Or are we just a weekly spectator? Doing our part is more than a deposit in the collection plate? What ministries are we involved in? Whose lives are we active in? Who is active in our lives? Who have we witnessed to about Christ this week? Can we remember the last time we witnessed at all?

The truth of the matter is that although we may not all be called to Pastor ministry, or a teaching ministry, we are all called to be evangelising the world of lost sinners. Therefore, whether we are active or not at this time, we are nonetheless called to work together to evangelise. Because no two people are alike, our styles and personalities will result in different approaches to evangelism. So long as the gospel message is preached, let's not be quick to judge style. Someone here may be called to witness in tough neighborhoods in Windsor. Perhaps because of their life experience, they can relate to the

people in those places. Perhaps they naturally have their attentive ear. Let that Christian brother or sister become all things to all people in order to win them to Christ. Perhaps someone in this room will have the ear of people in the corporate business world, let them have that ministry of relating to them. We all have a spot in this world where we can go and meet people exactly where they are in life with the gospel. Some of us will be blessed in our efforts and see much fruit. Others of us will labour intensely all of our lives and see little or no fruit. God shows no partiality with any of us, nor is our success in any way relative to our tactful approach. Let us co-labour like the apostles did to see the name of Christ spread across the globe to save sinners for His glory!

Paul had his own style, he had his own way of preaching the gospel. Peter likewise had his own. But regardless of personality traits, life experience, childhood upbringing, education, intelligence, humour, sarcasm, wit, (these things can help to connect with people) the gospel remains the gospel so long as the message of the gospel is preached fully and clearly, and faithfully. Paul's gospel wasn't different from Peter's, but it was independent from it. Paul's message was primarily (though not always and entirely) to Gentiles, while Peter's message was primarily (though not always and entirely) to Jews. They were meeting people from different worlds, and so the delivery needed a fine-tuning. Consider as a brief example the success that I would have in a neighborhood setting where the majority of people there spoke Chinese. If I had it in my heart to walk the street and witness to people about Christ, there's a good chance that I wouldn't have their attention because I'm not Chinese. That's not to pick on Chinese people, that was only one example, but it's just human nature to connect with familiarity. If, perhaps, I spoke Chinese, and I understood more of their culture, my attempt to give them the gospel might be more effective. All of this aside, most of us realize the need for God to act in salvation—that it is apart from our efforts. But I don't think that should stop us from trying to connect with people in an engaging way. Am I saying that we should only witness to those who look like us? No! But I am saying that there is value in becoming familiar to the environment you evangelise.

My point (because I feel like I'm straying) is that the church can have many different people evangelising many different people, in various ways, and yet still have a commonality. The methods may vary, but the message is always the same. The call for us is to cooperate with each other where the differences we enjoy, and employ, have nothing at all to do with the gospel. Not everyone needs to wear the same clothes, listen to the same music, have the same hairstyle, in order to be saved and legitimately reach others for Christ. That's a modern-day version of the problem Paul was having with the Judaizers who added obedience to the law on top of Paul's gospel. There should be things that Christians are willing to compromise with each other when it comes to issues of appearance, or music, or hairstyle. Where Christians need to be uncompromising is in the proclamation of the gospel. That is the only dividing line. As soon as a person, or a group, or a church (or a denomination for that matter) rejects the gospel, or alters the gospel in any way, there is to be no fellowship between siblings in Christ, no compromise.

Paul, Peter, John and James had genuine fellowship. They only asked one thing of Paul during his visit, verse 10, **"Remember the poor."** The very thing that Paul was eager to do. It's important that we recognize that the poor in reference here is not poor people in general, but the poor who served Christ in Judea, especially Jerusalem. Paul had come during a severe famine, many within the body of believers had a difficult time feeding and taking care of the other members. The converts in Jerusalem at this time were growing significantly, by the hundreds, maybe even thousands. Many of them were poor, and soon discovered that because of their Christian testimony it was quite difficult to even find employment. It was the common, and decent practice of those in Christ who had much, to meet the

needs of those brothers and sisters in Christ. But not only was the practice of taking care of the poor decent, it was also the spiritual responsibility of believers to do so. An important distinction that is sometimes lost in today's age of "Christian" organizations is between the mission of "feeding the poor" and "preaching the gospel". Both are important, but they are not the same, and a ministry lacking either wrong. Organizations such as the Salvation Army give us an example of blurring the distinction. William Booth was a Methodist preacher walking through the slums of London, England in 1865 when he became burdened over the poverty and apparent lack of help the church was providing. The Methodist officials were not supporting of his desires to meet the needs of the poor, forcing him to break away from the Methodist church and go freelance. And so what became known eventually as the "Salvation Army" was borne. His vision was to offer "soup, soap, and salvation". Booth envisioned cleaning up the homeless, filling their stomach with food, and then feeding their soul with Christ. By the 1930's [two decades after his death], his movement was already worldwide, however the look of his mission was more soup and soap than anything else.

This lesson is not about the details of the theology of William Booth, nor the assessment of the present day Salvation Army church. The purpose of bringing them up is to make the point filling a stomach is a godly thing to do. So is clothing the cold and wet. Any who would call themselves a Christian and yet ignore such a need that was right before their eyes would violate their own claim of being a Christian! But meeting those needs is not the gospel. When I was a teenager, I was president of the St. Vincent de Paul youth group at my high school. In fact, my Dad and I founded these youth group at St. Anne's, Lajeunesse, and Cardinal Carter high school, presenting the need in front of their entire school. Over the years we raised money and collected much food to help the poor. We would go to people's homes at Christmas time and shower them with boxes and boxes of food, as well as gifts that the parents could wrap as gifts for their children. But we never gave them the gospel [nor did we know the gospel at that time]. The work went on, and needs were met, and in my heart, God was well-pleased with my work. I truly felt that my labour would be rewarded greatly by God. Any organization that loses the focus of preaching the gospel to the poor has failed at the most critical point.

This is why here at Emmanuel, we place a high-emphasis on supporting our missionaries who meet both the physical and spiritual needs of people around the globe. We also take an offering monthly after our communion service which goes directly to the physical needs of those in the church. How much we can do to help these needs is a direct reflection of the hearts of those who give. A great example to us of one who placed a high-emphasis on the spreading the gospel *and* eagerly meeting the physical needs of the poor is the apostle Paul. The other apostles asked him to remember the poor, and Paul eagerly jumped at the opportunity. In 1 Corinthians we see Paul labouring to meet that need in 1 Cor. 16:1-4 and also 2 Corinthians 9. John says in 1 John 3:17, **"But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?"** Even James gives the challenge, **"What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."** (James 2:14-17) I challenge you this morning, how concerned are we see the physical needs of those around us met? And how concerned are we to see those who are physically strengthened then met with their greatest need, the gospel of Jesus Christ?