

Word Of Encouragement The Gospel According To Galatians

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The Gospel According to Galatians

I am delighted to inform you that our next 'Word of Encouragement' series will be on the *Apostle Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*. As Christians, we need to be constantly, moment-by-moment reminded of the good news or gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. We all have a tendency of forgetting the truth and reality of our union with Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, we regularly seek to replace the righteousness of Christ that has been given to us with a substitution of our own making, one of our own works.

As sinners saved by grace, a constant temptation for us is to replace Christ's righteousness with "another gospel" – one of our own making! Instead of living out our union with Jesus Christ by knowing we have been declared righteous or justified all because of God's grace given to us, we are tempted daily to replace his righteousness with our own. We just can't seem to get it through our heads that God loves us, that we are no longer slaves, and that we have been adopted as children of the living God!

"Sons, not slaves! Sons, not slaves!"

Righteous before God not based on anything we have done, or feel, but on what Christ has graciously done for us!

One of my favorite hymns of the Church is "Not What My Hands Have Done" and we would be wise to be reminded of these important truths:

*Not what my hands have done
Can save my guilty soul;
Not what my toiling flesh has borne
Can make my spirit whole.
Not what I feel or do
Can give me peace with God;
Not all my prayers and sighs and tears
Can bear my awful load.*

Thy work alone, O Christ,

*Can ease this weight of sin;
Thy blood alone, O Lamb of God,
Can give me peace within.
Thy love to me, O God,
Not mine, O Lord to thee,
Can rid me of this dark unrest
And set my spirit free.*

As the people of God, we are often tempted as the younger son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son to find our hope away from our Father's goodness, provision, and inheritance in Jesus Christ and substitute this for a "far country" where we serve as slaves with pigs. As the older brother in the same parable, we may not have sought after the "far country" in the same way, but we seek our own righteousness in our Father's presence and begin to take his mercy and grace for granted; we begin to think we somehow deserve what we get from God in Christ!

This important parable reminds us all that we can be just as far away from God's righteousness in our religious practice and church-going activities, as those who run far away from God's righteousness held out in Christ!

If you haven't realized it yet when you have read the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus is showing that we are all a little bit like the younger- -as well as the older brother in seeking righteousness away from our Father!

We all are tempted to seek righteousness, or right standing before God (whether close or far away from him) in what we do for God (or what we think we deserve from God) rather than giving thanks to him for our life that is hidden in Christ Jesus all because of his grace and mercy! If we ask "What would Jesus do?" before we remind ourselves of the gospel and ask "What has Jesus already done for me?" then we are in danger of substituting a righteousness of our own making with Christ's righteousness! (Think about it!).

We must constantly run to the righteousness held out to us in Jesus Christ. It is his righteousness that justifies us – not our own! We live obediently and grateful for what God has ***already done for us in Jesus Christ***. And so we can confidently say with the Apostle Paul:

***... I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God, for if justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose."* - Galatians 2:20-21**

This is why I believe it is so important for us to study the Book of Galatians as our next 'Word of Encouragement' series. Pray that God would empower and enable us by His powerful Spirit to receive, believe, and rest upon the good news, or

gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ that is found in the Book of Galatians. May God give us wisdom and discernment to live obediently, confidently and graciously from His righteousness alone – and learn constantly to repent of our own (even best!) righteousness! Amen.

When the gospel of grace is preached, and when the people of God receive it, believe it, and encourage each other with it – by God's grace – powerful disciples and saints are nurtured and matured for service that will literally change the world and build the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ!

When the gospel of grace is preached, and when the people of God receive it, believe it, and encourage each other with it – by God's grace – long lasting and juicy fruit is borne out of gratitude for what God has done for us in Jesus Christ to the glory of God! (He is the Vine and we are the branches. Jesus says: "Abide/Remain in me and I in you...you will bear much fruit...fruit that will last!")

Here are some questions that will be addressed and answered in the next few issues of *'Word of Encouragement.'* If you're using these 'WOEs' for small group studies, I encourage you honestly to ask yourself and the group these questions:

- 1) What is the Gospel of God's Grace in Jesus Christ?
- 2) What are "Other Gospels" that are competing with the true Gospel of grace? Why do we believe in the counterfeits so often?
- 3) How do we live as the Church, the Israel of God in true unity today?
- 4) What is Justification by faith alone and why is it so important for me to understand and believe it?
- 5) How do you live like you believe the gospel?
- 6) Do you think of yourself most of the time as God's slave or as his son or child?
- 7) What is "Reformed" Spirituality?
- 8) How do we keep in step with the Holy Spirit in our daily lives?
- 9) What is the relationship of the Law of God and the Gospel of Promise?
- 10) How can I better and more clearly and effectively make known the gospel to myself, my family, neighbors and to the world?

By God's grace, I will try to address these questions in future studies!

Substitutes and Fakes

Not many of us like substitutes, we want the real thing; we all desire authenticity! We want to know a real person in all their authenticity, not "get to know" or spend time with inauthentic, counterfeit people who are truly being themselves but replacing their true selves with substitutes and counterfeits. In fact, when we meet an inauthentic, counterfeit person, we call them a "fake" usually. We often avoid substitutes of all kinds in our lives because we long for the real thing. We avoid substitutes just because they are not authentic, but are counterfeit. Try

purchasing something with inauthentic, counterfeit money from the game 'Monopoly' and you will see the importance of the real thing over substitutes!

The Apostle Paul had preached the "real thing" that is the real and authentic gospel to the Galatian Christians. He had planted and established these congregations probably on his first and second missionary journeys (cf. Acts 13-16; letter written, ca. AD 49-55). Even though they had received the real and authentic gospel of God's grace in Christ, they had quickly turned to a substitute-which was no gospel at all! The Galatian Christians were turning to an inauthentic, counterfeit gospel.

What was this "other gospel"? Essentially it was believing by faith in the grace of Christ *plus something else*. The Apostle Paul quickly picks up his pen under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to write to these congregations and warn them of the dangers of substitute and counterfeit gospels- -which are no gospels at all. He begins his letter to the Galatians as many letters in the ancient world began. He writes:

Galatians 1:1-5 ^(ESV) ***Paul, an apostle- not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead-² and all the brothers who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.***

The counterfeit gospel preachers were lying to the Galatians. They have been known in interpretation history as "Judaizers." Essentially the Judaizers wanted to make new Gentile converts to faith in Jesus Christ to first become Jews through observance of Old Testament ceremonies and rituals, particularly insisting that they be circumcised. In the time between the Apostle Paul's first two missionary journeys to plant and establish these congregations, the Judaizers had come along and added something else to the pure and free authentic gospel of grace that Paul had preached- -and through which they had been saved. But they were in trouble of exchanging the real for a counterfeit or fake.

It was vitally important to the spiritual lives of these Christians to understand that the Apostle Paul was commissioned, called and sent specially and specifically by the risen Christ to preach the only, true, real, authentic gospel!

The Judaizers were trying to undermine Paul's influence and reception by the Galatian congregations by saying that he had no authority from the true twelve apostles from Jesus from Jerusalem. The Judaizers were telling these congregations that they were the true successors to the twelve apostles and that Paul had no authority whatsoever to teach them the gospel!

This was a serious error and lie from the Judaizers; many of these new Gentile converts to the faith were just babes in their understanding of Jesus' grace. They had yet learn to walk with Christ and had only recently been born again into the covenant community of faith out of the darkness of heathenism. Those who had believed Paul's gospel of grace alone, were not being tempted to believe in "grace alone, plus something else"! (Which appealed to their sinful desires of "works righteousness").

Therefore, Paul as their spiritual father (Gal. 4:19), writes to them to warn them that he is preaching to them the true, authentic, real and only gospel of grace - - and any other is a counterfeit or fake. In fact, he says that if an angel from heaven preached a different gospel from the one he had preached to them, or he himself came back after a few days and said that he had another gospel different from the one he had already declared to them- -not to listen to him! (Gal. 1:6-9).

^{ESV} **Galatians 1:8-9:** 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. ⁹ ***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.

Paul begins the letter with "Paul, an apostle not from men nor through man..." His purpose in this is to show that he was not commissioned by mere men, nor was he sent on his apostolic mission by mere men, but was sent by Christ himself.

^{ESV} **Galatians 1:1** Paul, an apostle- not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead-

^{ESV} **Galatians 1:12** For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

^{ESV} **Galatians 1:16** was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone...

Paul says "Not by man" in order to make clear his apostolic authority to speak God's word to the people.

Paul's "Road to Damascus Experience"

You may recall the Apostle Paul's glorious conversion on the Road to Damascus recorded for us in Acts 9. The Apostle Paul is on his way to kill leaders and followers of "The Way," or those who are following Jesus Christ whom was crucified (Acts 7-9).

With blood still fresh on his hands from the death of Stephen, Paul rushes to apprehend more of those who opposing the religion of his Jewish fathers (cf. Gal. 1:13-16), and bring them to their death! He is set on not only persecuting Christians, but destroying the Church of Christ itself—if he can! The gates of hell itself were attempting to prevail upon Christ’s Church! The Apostle Paul recalls in Galatians 1:13-14:

^{ESV} **Galatians 1:13-14:** For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴ 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....

In the midst of his madness and sinful misunderstanding, the risen Jesus Christ appears to Paul and tells him that he is not only persecuting the Church, you’re persecuting me! “I am Jesus who you are persecuting,” the risen Christ says to him (Acts 9:4). Paul immediately bows to the risen Christ’s lordship and realizes by God’s grace and powerful penetration of God’s Spirit and removal of the veil that is over his heart and eyes (cf. 2 Cor. 3:14-18) that this is Messiah that was promised in the Old Covenant, the very Seed of Abraham!

Christ calls and commissions Paul to preach his gospel of grace primarily to the Gentiles, and to suffer with Christ in order that he might experience joyfully Christ’s resurrection after his mission is complete (cf. Phil. 3:7-16).

Paul had been obedient to go with the authority of Christ himself to proclaim the gospel to the Roman Province of Galatia, particularly to the Galatian congregations in Pisidian Antioch, Lystra, Derbe, and Iconium – and by grace alone in Christ alone, they had been gloriously saved and converted from heathenism (Acts 13:1-15:6). Many had believed the authentic and true gospel and now their hope in Christ is threatened because they are ready quickly to exchange the gospel of grace, with the counterfeit and fake “gospel *plus something else*”, particularly a belief in Christ plus an obedience to the Old Covenant Law of Moses in order to be saved.

Paul writes to reestablish and declare his authority from Christ. This is important because if his authority from Christ is undermined, his gospel from Christ is undermined! This is what is at stake here. No, he didn’t get his call through the twelve apostles, but he did uniquely get his call from the risen Christ. Paul calls these Judaizers literally “trouble-makers” or “agitators” (Gal. 1:7; 5:10-12) because they were threatening the life of these congregations by denying the true and authentic gospel of grace.

^{ESV} **Galatians 5:10-12:** I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine, and ***the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty***, whoever he is. ¹¹ But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been

removed. ¹² ***I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!***

It is interesting how the Judaizers wanted to undermine Paul's authority in order to undermine the authority of Christ and thus HIS gospel. It is my experience that this is often how the evil one undermines the preaching and proclamation of God's Word, as well as the growth and maturity of Christ's congregations. Calvin wrote in his commentary:

The false apostles, who had deceived the Galatians to advance their own claims, pretended that they had received a commission from the apostles. Their method of infiltration was to get it believed that they represented the apostles and delivered a message for them. But they took away from Paul the name and authority of apostle....***In attacking Paul they were attacking the truth of the gospel.***"- Calvin, *Galatians*.

The evil one seems to attempt to constantly undermine the authority of the messenger in order to discount Christ's authority, and ultimately his gospel. We must be reminded of this threat and temptation especially in an age when all authority is suspect.

Now don't get me wrong, Paul's authority was unique. In fact, like the other twelve apostles, he was called specifically by Christ and sent as an apostle (which "sent one" is essentially what 'apostle' means). Paul's call was unique like the twelve apostles and so his authority from Christ, his call and commission from Christ was unique like the twelve. Paul was a special "Apostle to the Gentiles" called to preach particularly to the Gentiles.

"Descriptive" and "Prescriptive" Interpretation of the Apostle Paul

Let us pause for a moment in our study to consider an important hermeneutic principle when interpreting the life of Paul particularly and any narrative in scripture more generally. When considering the life of the Apostle Paul we want to remember two words to help us in our interpretation, because some today will think the Apostle Paul's call and commission, as well as his experiences will be experienced by all Christians. The two words to consider are "descriptive" and "prescriptive" when looking at the life of Paul in order to interpret and apply it to our own today.

In the account of the life of Paul, what happens to him can be either *descriptive* or *prescriptive*. Paul's unique call and commission by Christ on a road called Damascus is *descriptive* of what happened. If something is *descriptive* of Paul's life, it doesn't mean that it is applicable for all Christians. Paul's faith in Jesus Christ, his life, love, obedience, and endurance through his persecutions (2 Tim. 3:10ff) are not only *descriptive*, but they are also *prescriptive*. That means that Paul's life, love, obedience, and endurance in persecutions are *prescribed* for all

Christians like Paul.

Why is this important? If you don't make this distinction between *descriptive* and *prescriptive* you might end up saying something like this: "In 1996, I had a 'Road to Damascus' experience where I clearly saw the risen Christ and he called me to serve him, and now I am the Apostle Whoever." That would be confusing the *descriptive* and the *prescriptive*. You would be correct however if you said: "I learned that Paul believed in grace alone in Christ alone and that making the gospel known is of the utmost importance for the Christian." Why would that be correct? Because it is *prescriptive* of every Christian; it is *prescribed* for all Christians to believe and to make known the gospel. When reading Paul's life be aware of this, lest you end up producing the same error as the Judaizers: confusing Paul's unique call, commission, and authorities with your own!

The Apostle Paul begins his letter with his name, his authority, his call, his commission, and his Christ! He wants this congregation to grow up and mature and for Christ to be formed in them! (Gal. 4:19). He does not want them to substitute the true, real and authentic gospel for a fake. He wants the congregation to know that it is only by the grace of God through the will of God delivering up Christ for our sins (Gal. 1:3-5), that we have hope of being rescued from our sins and this present evil age! This truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ is *plus nothing else!*

The Judaizers were not realizing that a great redemptive-historical shift had occurred with the coming of Christ in the fullness of the times (Gal. 4:4). The Old Covenant that was passing away and becoming obsolete (2 Cor. 3:7-18; Hebrews 8:13) was giving way to the reality that it pointed forward to in Christ and the New Covenant.

With that redemptive-historical shift came continuities and discontinuities between the Old and New Covenant. There was going to have to be new God-given wine skins that could hold the new wine of grace! The old wine skins could not hold the wine of the glory of God poured out in the full revelation of Jesus!

Paul writes the Letter to the Churches of Galatia (Gal. 1:2b) in order to communicate the importance of the gospel of God's free grace in Christ alone. He writes to teach how we are justified by faith alone apart from any additions, pluses or works of the law. We are saved by grace plus nothing – and if anyone adds anything – it is not *gospel good news* and they are to be accursed (Gal. 1:6-11). This was serious business and the Apostle Paul addresses it under the inspiration of the Spirit of God so that Christians then and Christians now can grow up and be sons of the living God and no longer slaves to law! Calvin wrote:

'Paul had faithfully instructed [the Galatians] in the pure gospel, but false apostles had entered in his absence and corrupted the true seed by false

and corrupt dogmas. For they taught that the observance of ceremonies was still necessary. This might seem trivial, but Paul fights for it as a fundamental article of the Christian faith. And rightly so, for it is no light evil to quench the brightness of the gospel, lay a snare for consciences and remove the distinction between the old and new covenants. He saw that these errors were also related to an ungodly and destructive opinion on the deserving of righteousness....

Grace...Plus Nothing; Christ Plus Nothing

As we close today's study, think about how you personally exchange the good news of the gospel of grace for righteousness of your own making. I am fairly sure that you don't insist on yourself and new Christians being circumcised in order to be true Christians and understand the "full gospel."

However, the principle here in Galatians is that something is added to the gospel that has already been declared completed, fulfilled, and given to you by faith alone in Christ alone!

What do you add to the glorious gospel of grace?

Do you have right standing before God when you believe in the good news of Christ's grace plus what you can ***give to him, do for him, work for him?*** Then you are falling into the same error in principle of the Judaizers.

Do you insist on other Christians doing certain works in order to gain their right standing before God? Do you say if you're a good and obedient son of God to your parents, then you'll have right standing before God? Do you say that if you go on one more mission trip, you will have right standing before God? Do you say that you must have longer prayers, long quiet time, longer this, more that, before you will have right standing before God?

You see we are constantly struggling just to believe the simple message of the gospel of grace *plus nothing!* Does this tempt us to say, "Since it is all of grace then I can live any way I please?" Well, if you are really asking that, then you might be close to understanding the true and authentic gospel of Paul. In Romans 6, Paul says, "Shall we go on sinning so that grace might increase?" His question is one that is prompted when you truly understand grace *plus nothing*. But then Paul responds with, "God forbid- -may it never be!!!!" Why? Because we are no longer slaves to sin.

For Paul in Romans as well as what we will find in our study on Galatians wants us to understand that salvation is in Christ alone, by faith alone, through grace alone ***plus nothing***. We respond as grateful sons in obedience to who we already are, as we understand ourselves in union with the risen Christ, and that we are no longer slaves but sons- - children of the living God (Gal. 3:26-29).

According to the Apostle Paul, we truly understand grace when we see our identity and Christ and draw our positional standing before God only in Christ - not in what we are doing, or not doing for God!

Judaizers or “Proto-Semi-Pelagians”?

What should be sobering about the teaching of Galatians, and what may yet wake the modern evangelical church today from its un-dogmatic slumbers, is that it seems the Judaizers believed in the “essentials” of the Christian faith doctrinally such as Christ’s deity (Paul doesn’t have to argue for it up front in the letter), the supreme authority of Scripture (particularly the Old Covenant), and they also believed in the resurrection.

However, Paul still writes this controversial polemic because the message of the gospel, or good news of this risen Christ has been ‘nullified’ by adding something to it, namely ***man’s obedience or cooperation with the grace of God.***

What must be understood about the Judaizers (contrary to popular evangelical opinion) is that they were not denying the essential doctrines of Christianity, neither were they wholly putting their trust in their own works as in legalism, or what would later be called in Church history “Pelagianism”.

What the Judaizers were doing was affirming the essential doctrines of our most holy faith, while adding to the grace of God in Christ.

They did not put their trust in works alone, but they were putting their trust in the work of Christ and their works too! In other words, Judaizers were proto-Semi-Pelagians, or proto-Arminians. They believed that man’s obedience or cooperation with the grace of God was essential to be a true Christian!

We will close this study with Paul’s comment in Galatians 2. He says that if we add anything to the gospel, we nullify it.

^{ESV} **Galatians 2:20-21:** ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ **I do not nullify the grace of God, for if justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.**

What does “nullify” mean?

Two important definitions for us to consider:

1. to render or declare legally void or inoperative: to nullify a contract.

2. to deprive (something) of value or effectiveness; make futile or of no consequence.

How do you nullify the grace of God in your daily thinking and practices? Christ died for you and for the purpose of saving you from God's wrath and making you his children. Do not add to something already complete in Christ! Remember you have died and your life is hidden with God in Christ and you have been seated with him in the heavenly places- -already NOW! (Eph. 2:5-8; Col. 3:1-4).

Become who you already are in Jesus Christ!

Do not nullify the gospel of grace- -if you do you have bought into a counterfeit- - a real fake!

The hymn "Not What My Hands Have Done" continues beautifully:

*Thy grace alone, O God,
To me can pardon speak;
Thy pow'r alone, O Son of God,
Can this sore bondage break.
No other work, save thine,
No other blood will do;
No strength, save that which is divine,
Can bear me safely through.*

*I bless the Christ of God;
I rest on love divine;
And with unfalt'ring lip and heart
I call this Saviour mine.
This cross dispels each doubt;
I bury in his tomb
Each thought of unbelief and fear,
Each ling'ring shade of gloom.*

***I praise the God of grace;
I trust his truth and might;
He calls me his, I call him mine,
My God, my joy, my light.
'Tis he who saveth me,
And freely pardon gives;
I love because he loveth me,
I live because he lives.***

Next Study: Galatians 1:6-17: "Gospel 101 and Another Gospel"

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