

February 3, 2007

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Rescued by the Gospel

Galatians 1:1-5

1 Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), 2 and all the brethren 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 so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.

This letter to the Galatians is one of Paul's most intense and passionate letters we have. I believe that in Galatians we see Paul as exercised as he ever gets and his language is sometimes caustic and even biting – and sometimes cajoling and pleading, but always intense and passionate. And the reason is that the gospel of Christ is at stake. The circumstances that made this letter necessary in Paul's mind was that the gospel of Jesus Christ was being twisted. Paul says in verse 6 of this letter: *'I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel'* Evidently there a gospel that was making the rounds of the churches there in the region of Galatia – that was a radical departure from what Paul had been preaching and teaching.

Paul was never of the opinion that all roads lead to the same place or that doctrine doesn't matter. All of Paul's letters are filled with theology and doctrine because *what you think about God the Father and Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit makes a difference in how you live the Christian life.* And I don't think anything got Paul more excited than hearing bad theology and doctrine preached from the pulpit.

This Friday morning in the men's group, we were discussing the issue of Open Theism because it is taking hold in many Bible Schools, seminaries and churches around the country and the world. Simply put, Open Theism is the idea that says, *'God cannot foreknow the good or bad decisions of the people He creates until He creates these people and they in turn create their decisions.'* And because God cannot know what decisions people will make, the ultimate cause of many calamities and evils in our world are ascribed either to Satan, or to the autonomous will of man – *not* to the all-knowing counsel and wisdom of God. And that is bad theology. It is bad theology for a lot of reasons but primarily because it encourages a low view of God and dishonors Him immensely.

One of the proponents of this new view of God is John Sanders, professor of Religion at Hendrix College. In his book, *'The God Who Risks'*, Sanders writes: *'God does not have a specific, divine purpose for each and every occurrence of evil...When a two-month old child contracts a painful, incurable bone cancer that means suffering and death, it is pointless evil. The Holocaust is pointless evil...the accident that caused the death of my brother was a tragedy. God does not have a specific purpose in mind for these occurrences.'*

This view of God then has massive implications for our lives. If God is not ultimately in control – then to whom do we turn when calamities strike – when bad things happen to good people – when the evil that is in the world touches our lives and families? If God is not in control of heaven and earth – then we are put in the position of deciding which events were God-inspired and which ones were man-inspired and which ones Satan controlled. In fact, one of the spokespersons for this view, Dr. Greg Boyd, wrote: *'The ultimate reason behind all evil in the world is Satan, not God.'* You have to wonder if this theologian ever read the life of Joseph or his ringing endorsement that God is the final disposer of all things when he told his brothers: *'As for you, you meant it for evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.'* Genesis 50:20

Open Theism denies that God is ultimate disposer of all things: 'Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?' Job 2:10 It denies that God is fulfilling a plan for our good and His glory in either causing or permitting trouble, trials and tribulations, and even hints that God Himself is surprised at times by what happens – or that God, as Sander's title suggests, takes risks with His creation and does not know the ramifications of all our decisions until they happen.

How are we to *'Consider it all joy...when you encounter various trials...'* as James tells us, when in fact the trials we encounter may not be God-ordained? Theology is important. How we view God is crucial to how we ultimately live here on earth. And this is the reason Paul took up his pen and wrote to the Galatians.

The essence of the bad gospel these men were preaching was that **Jesus saves – and you must be**

circumcised. It was a gospel of Christ plus – Christ plus the law. With Open Theism we are dealing with a gospel of subtraction – here we are dealing with a gospel of addition. They were adding something to the gospel of God that said *we are saved by grace and perfected through the law*. And Paul gets red-hot about this – because what you believe about the gospel determines in large part how you live the Christian life.

The essence of Galatians is this: *The cross of Christ has brought an end to ethnic religious observances, and by faith we embrace the work of the cross and receive the Holy Spirit and new nature; all the law could do was bring about condemnation, but the Holy Spirit produces the righteousness that the law could not and enables the believers to resist sin and live holy lives.* Paul wrote because the gospel of Jesus Christ was at stake and was in danger of being diluted, diverted and distorted. I would like to firstly sum up the whole passage 1 – 5 and then look at its individual parts. Verses 1-2 lays out Paul's bona fides for this letter – he is **an apostle whose authority and calling is not from men but from God** – and he has the endorsement of all those who stand with him for the gospel. Verses 3 – 5 say essentially this: **Grace to you and glory to God** – because Christ has died for our sins and rescued us from this present evil age. Now let us break that down and see what it looks like.

Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead),

Paul claimed apostleship – not because he had a seminary degree – he did, or what passed for one in that day – but on the basis of the authority of Jesus Christ and God the Father. This is essential to the rest of his letter because this lays out the authority behind what Paul wrote. In the New Testament, the word 'apostle' has the bare meaning of 'sent one'. That is someone who is sent out on a particular mission – in this case, carrying the gospel to the Gentiles. This word is used to describe Ephaphroditus in Philippians, sent by the Philippian church to minister to the needs of Paul. And it is used again in 2 Corinthians to describe those sent by the churches of Macedonia to help Paul in his mission to take money to the poor. They were men, sent by other men, on a mission.

But Paul is not using the term 'apostle' here in Galatians 1 in that sense. He explicitly says, *Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father,*. That meant that Paul was not some generic ambassador sent on a man-made mission. He uses the term in the sense we understand in 1 Corinthians 9:1: *'Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal ^{R309} of my apostleship in the Lord.'* and 15:8-9: *'and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.'* And in the sense used in Acts 1:21-22: *"Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us-- beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us--one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection."*

From these passages it is clear that an apostle in this sense means **one who had seen the risen Christ and had been sent by Him for the cause of the gospel**. That is why the Lord appeared to Paul on the Damascus road and sent him to teach and preach and perform miracles with the same authority He had once given the other apostles. This meant that Paul is among that select, never-to-be repeated number of apostles who together with the prophets of old were the foundation of the church. One thing to understand about this is that anyone claiming this kind of apostolic authority today is a liar and very probably teaching some kind of gospel of addition or subtraction.

Another implication we see here is that **Paul's claim of apostolic authority means that what he wrote to them was the very word of God**. When you read Galatians, you are hearing Christ, since the apostle speaks with the authority of the one who commissioned him. When we read Galatians, when we read Romans, when we read Paul's letters, we lay bare the very heart of the Father for His children.

A third implication is that **since this is the very word of God – we must submit our whole lives to this**. In the church of today, there seems to be less and less of this kind of attitude. The word of God is thought of as a nice collection of wise words to live by – but nearly no effort is made to bring our mind, emotion and will under the control of the word of God. Our habits of tongue and body and mind are clearly contradicted by the apostle's teaching, and the word of God seems to have very little weight in our lives. Instead of *taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ*, 2 Corinthians 10:5, we take some thoughts captive and indulge ourselves in the rest – or we don't bother at all. Instead of, *putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander*, 1 Peter 2:1, we rather tolerate a little malice or deceit or hypocrisy or slander and call it good.

A third implication is that ***because this is the apostle's word, and therefore it is God's word, we cannot just make the Bible say what we want it to say.*** There is an effort in many Christian circles to work the text until it says what we want to hear. We don't like hard stuff – so we work it until it says things we can deal with. The most blatant example is the whole discussion of what the Bible means when it talks about homosexuality. And in an effort to work the text into a comfortable, easy and appealing form, practicing homosexuals in the church and leading theologians have come to the conclusion that when Paul used the word homosexual he wasn't talking about caring, committed relationships between two people of the same sex, but something else.

But if you take this as the word of God and apply yourself to the grammar and syntax and word studies of the Greek and Hebrew, you cannot help but reach the conclusion that Paul was saying that homosexuality is sin – and it doesn't matter that you are caring and committed. *Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals,* 1 Corinthians 6:9

The reason that the Reformation was such an epoch event was not because Luther or Calvin or Zwingli were such great men – but they were men who were submitted to the control and authority and serious study of Scripture. And they inspired others to look deeply into the sacred text and discover for themselves the power of God in the word as they in turn submitted every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. If we believe that this is the authoritative word of the Lord's apostle, and that every word is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness – then we will not be content with trying to make the text say what we want it to say – and we will not be content to let others do the same thing. This is why Paul wrote this letter – these teachers were taking liberties with the gospel and making it say what they wanted it to say. And Paul is saying, 'Don't do that! Don't say that! That is not the gospel! Let me make it clear what the gospel is all about!

First of all ***the gospel is grace and peace. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins,*** and the implication here is that ***the word of Paul the apostle, is the word of God that brings the gospel of grace and peace.*** The gospel of God is the gospel of grace – that is, it is the word that is the power of God to save us. The gospel ought to convey the grace of God to the hearer. What these other men were teaching conveyed the law – which is not able to save. Paul says in Romans 8:3-4 *'For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us'* These teachers were not teaching the gospel of grace – but the gospel of law. The Lord Jesus Christ, giving Himself for our sins is grace to us.

And it is the gospel of peace to us as well – peace with God and peace with one another. It is not possible to have peace with the Law. The law of God stands outside of us, condemning us, and we have no means to reach its perfection. The law of God says be perfect even as your Heavenly Father is perfect – and we find no peace because we can't get there from here. But the gospel is grace and peace. Grace from God to pay the penalty for our sins and grace in sending the Holy Spirit to transform our hearts and minds into the image of Christ – and it is peace from the wrath of God revealed against all unrighteousness. Grace and peace to you.

The center and foundation of the gospel is the cross of Christ that conveys the grace and peace of God to us. Any gospel that does not rest on the cross of Christ – any gospel that does not boast in the cross – is no gospel at all. Those who teach a different gospel always rest it on something other than the cross. In this case they were resting on the outward sign of circumcision. They took a symbol and made it the foundation of salvation. There are even many today who make something other than the cross the means of salvation.

And that is wrong and it is deadly, because it contradicts the Bible – and it is wrong and it is deadly because other things have no power to rescue us from this present evil age. The word of God became flesh and dwelt among us and went to the cross bearing our sins – *so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.* Only the gospel has the power to rescue us from this present evil age. Paul's gospel conveys grace and truth to us because it preaches Christ crucified for our rescue from this present evil age.

It is rescue from this present evil age because only the cross has the power to liberate us from thinking like this age and being conformed to this age. There is a mindset in the world that keeps all men under the bondage of sin and until they come to the cross they cannot experience the freedom in Christ that comes from having your sins washed away and experiencing the peace of God in your heart. Whether men know it or not – all who have not trusted Christ as their Savior are laboring under a load of guilt and fear and anger and selfishness and greed – and they need to be rescued – rescued from this present evil age.

This is why the gospel is Good News and this is why we need to be those who are passionate about the truth of the gospel and passionate about making others glad in God through the gospel. Paul ends this little section with high praise to the One who rescued us with the gospel. *5 to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.*

As we come to the Table of the Lord this morning, I want to invite you to be rescued from this present evil age. If you have never experienced the grace and peace of God in your heart – if you are laboring under a load of guilt, fear, anger and a sense of separation from the God of grace and peace – be rescued this morning by the sacrifice of Jesus who died in your place so that you might be rescued from this present evil age and released into the freedom of the cross of Christ.

Our gracious God and wonderful Savior,

Grant that we would enjoy and savor the sweet promises of the gospel of grace and peace. Open eyes that have been blinded by the blandishments of this age and soften hearts made hard by the deceitfulness of sin. May the power of the word of God penetrate our hearts and minds to reveal the glory of Christ and the splendor of His truth. Forbid that we would remain immune to the life-changing power of the word of God – but that we would drink deeply from the well of grace and let your word transform our minds, emotions and wills into the image of Christ. Rescue us O Lord from this present evil age and cause us to live before You in righteousness and peace – as those who have been made glad in God, living to make others glad in You through the gospel we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

**May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto You.
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.**