

February 10, 2007

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Be Careful Not to Distort the Gospel

Galatians 1:6-10

6 I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; 7 which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! 9 As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed! 10 For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.

This morning I want to give you a little more background on this letter to help you better understand what was at stake and hopefully help you understand what is at stake even today. The churches in Galatia were established for the most part during the second missionary journey of Paul, when he and Barnabas were sent out. Acts 13 and 14 detail the establishment of those churches in places like Derbe, Lystra, Lycaonia, and Iconium. In each of those cities, the gospel was preached, signs and wonders were performed, Jews and Gentiles were saved, and churches were established. And in every city, the religious Jews, who wanted nothing to do with Jesus, dogged their steps and created a lot of trouble for the apostles. In Iconium, for example, the Bible records that Paul and Barnabas: *'...entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.* Acts 14:1-2

And what we need to understand from this is that wherever the gospel is preached, opposition will arise – and interestingly enough – the biggest enemies come from the ranks of the religious community. Often this is confirmation that what is being preached is the real deal and we should not be surprised by opposition. Satan will not give up without a fight. I love Paul and Barnabas' response to the opposition: *So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.* Acts 14:3 *The enemy stirred up the crowds and poisoned their minds – So they remained for a long time!* The fact that Satan fights does not mean in the least that he has a chance of winning – it simply postpones the inevitable. God's purpose is invincible.

In Lystra, the Lord healed a man lame from birth through Paul, and the people said, *'The Gods have become men and come down to us'* and they were trying to offer sacrifices to them. But those disobedient Jews had followed them there and the Bible records that *'...having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.'* Acts 14:19 God however had different plans for Paul and after an impromptu prayer meeting, he got up and went on to the next city. And the Bible records that after they had preached to that city, they went back through all the cities they had visited – appointing leadership in each church, strengthening and encouraging them to continue in the faith – telling them that *'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God'* – and continued on into other provinces – and then Luke records that they returned to Antioch, gave a report to the church of all that God had done – and then the Bible says, *'...they spent a long time with the disciples.'*

How long that was we're not sure, but the very next chapter records that some men came down from Judea and began teaching the Gentile believers that they had to be circumcised. Now these were probably not the same Jews that had been following them around Asia – but they were cut from the same cloth. They thought the gospel was *Jesus – and: Jesus and the Law.* One point in John's gospel was written for men like this: *'For of His fulness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.'* John 1:16-17

Moses brought the perfect law of God – and nobody could live up to it until Christ. One of the very reasons Jesus came was to fulfill all the righteous requirements of the law – as Paul tells us in Romans 8. The Law reveals not only our sin – but God's immutable righteousness and Christ came to make that righteousness a reality in His people. The word translated *'truth'* in verse 17 of John 1, is also translated as *'reality'*. Truth, the truth, is reality – it is the substance of what really is. So another reading is this: *For the law was given through Moses; grace and reality came through Jesus Christ.'*

Jesus is the truth or reality of the Law; He is the embodiment of all that the Law describes; when you look up the law of God in the dictionary – His picture is the only definition there – and the way that the Law of God is written on our hearts and becomes a reality in our lives is by grace – not by circumcision.

This is crucial for us to understand because this letter, and our faith, stands or falls on the gospel of grace. When those Jews came and started preaching you must be born again – and be circumcised – they threw the Gentile believers into confusion. Luke then spends all of chapter 15 of Acts on the resolution of this problem – because it was such a fundamental issue and the truth of the gospel hung in the balance. And so it was during this time, many scholars believe that Paul wrote this book to the Galatians because their faith was being eroded and upset by this different gospel being preached by these Judaizers.

6 I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel;

Paul's stance here is one of amazement – he is frankly amazed that someone would hear and seemingly believe the gospel and then desert to some other gospel. Remember that the gospel was preached to them with signs and wonders, and many Gentiles and Jews believed the gospel and churches were started. But just a short time afterwards, the word comes to Paul while he is in Antioch that the churches in Galatia are deserting Christ for a different gospel. And it is not just a turning away from some doctrine – Paul says that they are deserting the One who called them by the grace of Christ.

Deserting the gospel of grace is deserting the God of grace – you turn your back on Him – not just some particular theological construct. *Ultimately the gospel is God – that is Christ died for us to give us Himself.* The stunning wonderful goal of the gospel is expressed in Colossians 1:27: *God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.* This is what God told Abraham in Genesis 15:1: *'Do not fear...I am your exceeding great reward.'* To reject this gospel is to reject God Himself.

I think too, that Paul was amazed because it was a gospel of grace that he preached – not a gospel of merit or of trying to measure up – not the law – but grace! It was as if he said. *'I could understand your desertion if I was preaching the hard law of Moses and demanded that you obey or else. But I was preaching a gospel of grace of freedom from the law and sin and wrath and damnation! But you are listening to those wretched teachers of grace plus works that turn your freedom into slavery again – those teachers who call you not to grace but to wrath, from loving God to hating Him, from blessed assurance to terrifying uncertainty!'*

And Paul was not saying that this was just a different way of looking at salvation – a different gospel was not just another way to Christ. ***He was saying there is only one gospel.*** The word he uses here means a difference in kind – *it is a gospel of a dissimilar nature.* They were called and saved by the gospel of grace – but this was something other. At its core – what it delivered was not grace – but the Law. In fact Paul makes it clear that there is no other gospel. He says that he's amazed that they are deserting Christ for a different gospel – ***7 which is really not another;*** The Greek here is very specific. He says that this different gospel is *different in nature* – and then he says, to emphasize this point: it is *not another gospel of a similar nature to the gospel of grace.*

Paul is not of the opinion that there are several possible gospels and the Galatians have simply attached themselves to one of the many available gospels. He makes it clear that what they have done is adopted a distorted gospel: ***only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.*** The word *'distort'* here in the Greek means to turn or change one thing into another thing. In Acts 2:20 it is used to describe turning sunlight into darkness; and in James 4:9, turning laughter into mourning. Used here in Galatians, it is a twisting of the truth so that the gospel really isn't the gospel after all – it has become something else.

This is crucial because a distorted gospel cannot save. A distorted gospel says: Come to Christ – and be circumcised. The outward sign of the covenant becomes the means to salvation. Now most of us cannot track with a gospel that includes circumcision. That just isn't preached in our day – and if someone came along preaching that kind of gospel – I don't think he'd get too many takers. But here is a gospel that strikes a little closer to home: *Come to Christ – and do not smoke, drink, dance, play cards, or go to the movies.* This distortion reduces the gospel to a list of do's and don't's that *strangle grace and suck the joy out of the gospel.* And some of you may have grown up hearing this kind of gospel.

Of course the message is come to Christ and stop sinning – but sin is very particularly described as at least participating in these things. How the message is fleshed out is that people who are Christ's followers do not smoke, drink, dance, play cards or go to the movies. And that may be true – on the other hand it may not. Now I know I run the risk of being accused of advocating sinful behavior – but please do not misunderstand me. ***What I am saying is that to link your salvation with doing or not doing something – instead of relying on the life-changing, habit-destroying, sin-killing, joy-filling grace of God – is a distortion of the gospel.***

Now there are some activities the Bible clearly says are sin – and I don't think I need to list them all here. But none of those things I just mentioned are on the list that God gives. These are additions to the gospel and what that does is link salvation with works – and that does not save but rather kills. The truth of the gospel is that Jesus saves – utterly. What the gospel of grace does is transform sinners into saints. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation. The circumcision-loving Jews who preached this distorted gospel made it the basis for salvation and circumcision was somehow imbued with the power to save. The same goes for any gospel that teaches *something to do* rather than *grace to receive*.

Please do not misunderstand me. I embrace and joyfully concur with the Word of God: *Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us*, Hebrews 12:1 As believers we are to lay aside both encumbrances and sin. Encumbrances are not sin – they are things that weigh us down. Most of us have no problem with laying aside things which are clearly sin – but we have an awful time with things that may or may not be sin. *The question is not 'Is this sin?' but rather. 'Does this help me run the race with endurance?' 'Does this weigh me down?' 'Is this something that entangles me? Or does it help me run the race?' Because the gospel ultimately is about having a relationship with the God of the universe, the Lord of love – I would instead ask: 'Does this bring me closer to God or does it take me away from His presence?'*

A distorted gospel also looks like this: Come to Christ – and have better life. I recently read an excerpt out of Patrick Morley's book "Walking with Christ in the Details of Life." It is a book of meditations that includes one called "Revival: The Gospel of Addition." He says, *"The American gospel has evolved into a gospel of addition without subtraction. It is the belief that we can add Christ to our lives, but not subtract sin. It is a change in belief without a change in behavior... A changed life is one that has added Christ and subtracted sin, that attracts a world weary of worn-out words. Obedience is the proof."* One of the worst gospel slogans I ever heard was, 'Things go better with Christ.' *And in one sense I so wholeheartedly agree.* But the underlying message is that things might be okay for you without Christ. But if you add Jesus to the mix – you will be better off. Like if you buy the economy model sedan – it will get you around to work and the mall – but if you get a Lexus – whoo hoo!

A distorted gospel looks like this: ***Come to Christ – and prosper.*** Come to Christ and see your wealth increase – your influence rise – your stock portfolio grow fat. Make no mistake – the so-called prosperity gospel is a twisted gospel. It is twisted because the focus is on the here and now – the focus is on your comfort – your well-being – your goals, dreams and ambitions – it is a gospel that gives you what you want, and does not point you to God. Luring people to Christ by promising material wealth and comfort is deceitful and deadly. It is deceitful because Jesus said, *'...no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.'* Luke 14:33 Jesus never promised more money. And it is deadly because Paul told Timothy that *'...those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction.'* 1 Timothy 6:9 Why would you preach a gospel that stirs up suicidal desires?

Why would you preach a gospel that ignites the lust for money? Why would you preach gospel that makes it hard for people to get into heaven? 'How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God.' And yet thousands of people are signing up for this gospel; and they are going to be absolutely stunned one day when they stand before God. But I think they will be in far less trouble than those who have preached this message. Paul tells the Galatians: *8 But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! 9 As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!*

When a person takes the gospel of grace and turns it into something else – God has only one response: ***Anathema! Accursed!*** This is not a slap on the wrist! Someone under this sentence is cut off from God and doomed to eternal punishment. This is not a casual thing. 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 says that those who do not obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus will pay the penalty of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord.

This is an appalling prospect that has awesome implications not only for those who teach a different gospel but those who receive it as well. And Paul makes that connection when he makes it clear that the Galatians are leaving the gospel of grace for another gospel. A different gospel ultimately points people away from God and directs hearts and minds some other place and those who are won by it are put in the position of those Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 16:22: *'If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed.'* The gospel that is preached must point us to Christ above all and ignite that flame of love in our hearts for Him – not other things.

Finally, mixed up in this whole thing must have been some element of a man-pleasing attitude among these false teachers because Paul says this: *10 For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.* Perhaps those false teachers, converted Jews, were trying to please the Jewish tradition they had come from. Perhaps they were trying to keep the peace with their orthodox friends and neighbors and win them to Christ. But in doing so they perverted the gospel of Christ. But Paul's concern was the purity of devotion to Christ and the purity of the message of the gospel of grace.

Last year, an open letter was written to the Christian community and signed by 138 leading Muslim clerics called A Common Word Between Us and You. In October of last year, a response from leading Christians was printed in the New York Times. In part it said, *'We receive the open letter as a Muslim hand of conviviality and cooperation extended to Christians worldwide. In this response we extend our own Christian hand in return, so that together with all other human beings we may live in peace and justice as we seek to love God and our neighbors.'* The response focused on the common ground of loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself and attempt to bridge the gap between Muslims and Christians.

On the face of it, it seems good – peace and justice, loving God and loving your neighbor. The problem comes in when we begin to talk about the God we each say that we love. **And the problem is that we do not love the same God.** The God we love, the God of the gospel is the One who sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. The Muslims do not love this God – because they reject Jesus as the Son of God. And Jesus says, *'If you reject Me, you reject My Father who sent Me.'* Luke 10:16 This was a misguided attempt to win Muslims to the gospel. But at the heart is a distortion of the gospel of grace. The gospel is not an attempt to smooth over differences and bring peace at any cost. A distorted gospel will not save.

Paul had just delivered a speech guaranteed not to win friends and influence enemies. Most people don't like to hear a message of damnation. But pleasing men was never Paul's goal. *Two things are at stake in this issue: the glory of God and the salvation of men* – and if the gospel is distorted – the all-sufficiency of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus is diluted; and the salvation of men is endangered. Paul is willing to speak an unpopular message for the sake of the gospel.

However we do not want to take from this that the more people you offend the better you're doing. Paul's ambition was to glorify God in whatever he did, not giving offense to Jews or Greeks or those in the church, but rather trying to please all men in all things, not looking for his own profit but that of others – *so that they may be saved!* 1 Corinthians 10:31 But if the gospel that is being preached prevents effective salvation – then Paul assaults those who teach falsely, as Luther says, 'With dreadful thunderclaps of damnation!'

Another implication of this is that if you embrace the gospel of grace – then you live to please only the One who saves you by His grace. Other opinions do not sway you. When you live to please Christ only – then all you do is tied together because it all relates to Him. That is, questions like, 'Shall I dance? Shall I go to this movie? Shall I watch that program on TV? Shall I buy that dress or power tool? Read this book? Eat that piece of pie? - **all become a test of where our hearts are with God.** All of those questions are answered by what pleases Him.

The gospel of grace is not a list of do's and don'ts – it is not just the addition of Christ to whatever we are already doing – it is not a get rich quick scheme – **the gospel of grace is the joyful proclamation that Jesus Christ gave Himself for our sins so that we might enjoy Him forever and glorify God by making Him the center of our joy.** Do not think that this gospel is simply the means to come to Christ – that this is the way we get saved and then we move on. The gospel of grace is the power of God unto salvation – and that is life-long. We never outgrow the need for the strengthening power of the gospel of grace. And that is why we need to be careful we do not distort the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our gracious and all-satisfying heavenly Father,

Grant that we would know and savor the the goodness of Your grace in the gospel. Do not let us be bamboozled by another gospel that is no gospel at all. Do not let us substitute works or gifts or any other thing for the grace of God in Christ. Let us experience the gospel of Jesus Christ in all its fullness which is Christ crucified and risen for sinners like us to bring us home to You. May we be those who proclaim the life-changing, habit-destroying, sin-killing, joy-filling grace of God and those who delight ourselves in You and treasure Christ in all our lives – and who live to make the nations glad in You through the gospel, we pray in the precious, saving name of Jesus Christ, 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.**