

February 24, 2008

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Set Apart for the Gospel

Galatians 1:11-24; 2:1-10

11 For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. 12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. 13 For you have heard of my former manner of life in Judaism, how I used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it; 14 and I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions. 15 But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased 16 to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. 18 Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. 19 But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother. 20 (Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.) 21 Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. 22 I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ; 23 but only, they kept hearing, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy." 24 And they were glorifying God because of me.

1 Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. 2 It was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain. 3 But not even Titus, who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. 4 But it was because of the false brethren secretly brought in, who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage. 5 But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you. 6 But from those who were of high reputation (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)--well, those who were of reputation contributed nothing to me. 7 But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised 8 (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), 9 and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. 10 They only asked us to remember the poor--the very thing I also was eager to do.

We read this rather large portion of Scripture this morning because I want us to have a forest and trees view here. I am not intending to cover the whole thing but I want us to see the big picture – the forest – the scope of what is going on here – and we want to see the individual trees – how the trees in this forest relate to one another and how they relate to us. The forest view is that this whole section, 1:11 – 2:10, is Paul's defense that he is not just some johnny-come-lately with no credentials or authority – and the gospel he preaches is not somehow deficient or lacking in some respects. And it is important for the Galatians to understand that. They had been impacted with the truth of the gospel when Paul first preached it to them – they committed their lives to Christ in glad submission to the gospel and churches were started. But over time – the revelation they had seemed to fade a bit – the high regard they held Paul in slipped a bit as these gospel-distorters began making their rounds. So Paul spends quite a bit of time presenting the truth and establishing for them the bona fides of his apostleship. That's the forest.

What we continue to see in these verses is Paul's defense of the gospel to those to whom he had preached the gospel in Galatia. And Paul is forced to defend what he had preached as the gospel truth because of those teachers of a grace-plus gospel. These guys came along after Paul had established churches all over Asia Minor, not only in the province of Galatia, but many of the other Roman provinces as well. These were probably Christian Jews who understood the gospel to mean that **we are saved by grace and by keeping the law**. These guys preached circumcision and observance of particular days and feasts of the Jewish calendar as necessary instruments of salvation. We know that this is at least in part what they thought because of Paul's word to the Galatians in chapter 3: *'Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?'* Galatians 3:3 This implies that these guys were in some way portraying things like circumcision and feast-keeping, and special day-observing, as essential elements of sanctification and ultimately, salvation. **That is they were adding requirements to the gospel of grace.**

Paul was also forced to respond to this because these teachers of a distorted gospel were apparently promoting their gospel by discrediting Paul and his gospel. We have to tease this out of the text by looking at Paul's defense of his credentials which started in verse 1 with his reply to the apparent charge that he was not a real apostle: *'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)*. He counters the charge that he was preaching a man-made, illegitimate gospel (and by implication a non-authoritative gospel) with his statement in verses 11 and 12 that: *'I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.* Evidently there were charges that Paul had learned his gospel from secondhand sources and it was missing a few things. The charges implied that the Galatians had been short-changed and they didn't need to pay attention to Paul because he really had no authority from God.

The individual trees here that make up the forest bear looking at in relation to how they separately and together give substance to the forest. We really ended last week with verse 15 through the first part of verse 16: *'But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me...'* and we understand from this at least 4 things:

God Himself is the initiator and sustainer of faith. We cannot begin, nor can we sustain any kind of saving faith in and of ourselves.

The choosing of those who come to God is His choice – not ours. We love because He first loved us.

Our calling to Christ is through His irresistible grace. That is, God will do whatever is necessary to overcome our resistance.

The goal of God's election and calling is that Christ would be revealed in us. That is, we would look like Jesus.

So backing up to look at the whole context here: *But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, was pleased 16 to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.*

Paul says that the point of his being called by the grace of God was so that he would preach the gospel among the Gentiles. If you stopped to think about this for a bit – you have to admit it is very ironic. Paul the Pharisee, a guy who studiously avoided any contact with Gentiles – who had to take a bath every time he accidentally brushed up against one – was the one through whom God chose to reveal the gospel to the great unwashed.

I think Paul is saying outright at least one thing here – and one other thing is implied in the text. **The first is that he is the legitimate apostle to these Gentile churches, not these other guys.** The Lord Jesus specifically gave him that authority – from where does their authority come? **And the other thing, implied, is that the Lord often uses the most unlikely tools in the shed to accomplish His purpose.** If you were going to start a ministry to pagan Gentile believers who had no background in Judaism, knew nothing about the Law or the myriad of Jewish ordinances – who wouldn't know a Shabbat from a Shalom – you wouldn't pick a Pharisee. You would probably pick a good Gentile convert. But God rarely works that way. He chose a murdering Egyptian prince to lead His people out of captivity. He chose an overlooked shepherd boy to deliver His people from their perennial enemy and set up the kingdom. And He chose a fanatical, murder-in-his-heart legalistic Pharisee to bring the gospel of grace to the Gentiles. So do not discount your background, education, social status or any other thing – because God is in charge here and He is not constrained by your environment or childhood or training.

But the important thing I think to notice, is that Paul clearly says that **God set him apart for a specific purpose and called him according to that purpose.** *But when God, who had set me apart even from my mother's womb, and called me through His grace...so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles '.* And we need to know that the God who calls us by His grace into His marvelous light, calls us based on His setting us apart for a particular purpose. That is, **the glad submission of our will to His is a glad submission to His call on our life.** Or to put it another way – **when we are called – we are called into service.** I would like to ask you a question: What has God called you to? Why did He set you apart? How does He intend you to serve? Do you know? God has not called you to a job to make money to put clothes on your back and food in your stomach so that you can own a house and three cars and an RV and put you kids through college and then retire to Florida and live in a gated community to play shuffleboard at the club. What is God's call on your life? For what purpose have you been set apart?

Paul's realization that God had set him apart for some specific purpose was also rooted in the understanding that because God set him apart, God then called him to His purpose at the right time. That is, **God's choosing is coincidental with His calling.** Or to put it another way, **our conversion coincides with our calling.** Unless we realize that God has a plan for our lives – that God thought about this long before we were born – we may think that coming to Christ is merely all about cleaning us up and getting us to heaven. But God has a specific purpose for each one of us. **Generally** that purpose is to glorify God by enjoying Him forever. But there is also a **specific** purpose – a specific job – He has for each one of us. No doubt Paul was recalling the words of Jeremiah in chapter one: *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, And before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations."* Jeremiah 1:5 And in the **general** sense God knows all those whom He intends to call before we are even formed within the womb – and then has **specifically** set us apart for a particular purpose in the building of His kingdom.

Paul's purpose was to be a preacher to the Gentiles. In Acts chapter 10 Peter got the revelation – but it was Paul who got the commission. Peter clearly heard from God that salvation was for the Gentiles and not just the Jews – but God chose Paul to put feet to the gospel. So the question is – for what has God set you apart? **What specific purpose has He called you to in His kingdom work?**

In his book, ***The Grand Weaver***, Ravi Zacharias tells about an old superstition from his country that encourages parents to predict their child's future. Folk wisdom suggests that while the child is still a toddler, the parent should place on a table, within the child's reach, a bottle of wine, some money, and a Bible. If the little one walks up to the table and picks up the Bible, he will follow a spiritual vocation, possibly the priest hood. If he picks up the bottle of wine, then hedonism is in the cards. If he picks up the money, he will probably become a businessperson or an entrepreneur. Ravi then tells the story of a new father, eager to plan for his son's future, who administered the test. He carefully positioned the three objects on the coffee table, watching eagerly what the little boy would do with them. The little guy walked up to the table, surveyed everything, and slowly reached out his hand for the Bible. Then he paused and picked up the money as well, placing it in the Bible. Finally he tucked the Bible under one arm, took the bottle of wine in the other hand, and toddled off with all three, struggling to maintain his balance. The little boy's grandfather stood over to the side, silently watching the whole scene unfold. When he saw the dismay on his own son's face, he said, *"This is bad news. He's going to become a politician."* (Ravi Zacharias, ***The Grand Weaver***, p. 53)

This is probably not a really good way to determine our calling in life. That is something I cannot tell you nor can your parents or any other person – you need a revelation from Heaven. But I urge you, by the mercies of God, not to be content with simply living out your days – but rather to understand why you were set apart and called – and to engage with all your heart and soul in it.

We need to understand, as Paul did, that **God does not set us apart and call us into service to somehow make something out of us – but rather so that we can make much of Him.** We need to be energetically engaged in the purpose of God for our lives or we risk wasting our lives with so many other things. Fathers and mothers, don't fill the heart and soul and minds of your children with lesser pursuits – challenge them to hear from God. Too much emphasis today is placed on the stuff of life – getting a good education – getting a good job – buying a house and car and all the other stuff, and we as parents are guilty of over-emphasizing these things with our children and not **filling them with a God-wardness – a sense of the priority of God's purpose in their lives.** Don't misunderstand me – I am not against education, houses, cars and good jobs – they are all good in their proper context. But we as a society are consumed with these things and the purpose of God languishes in our souls and we struggle with anger and anxiety and depression and a whole lot of other things because we are not engaged in the purpose God has planned out for us.

Listen, **one reason we struggle in our Christian life is because we are not doing what God has called us to do.** Perhaps we have even heard the call of God on our lives and yet have turned and gone another way because we didn't think it was God, or we didn't want it to be from God, or whatever it was was too hard or too menial or too risky. Or perhaps we have never slowed down enough to hear from God what it is we are supposed to be doing – we just assume what the rest of our culture assumes to be true for our lives and never give the purpose of God a thought. This is why most prayer meetings of the church in America, (a disappearing phenomenon anyway) have in many places turned into a mid-week health report. Instead of prayers that engage our hearts and souls and minds with the purpose of God on the earth we treat our throne-room privilege as an opportunity to air our ailments.

Don't misunderstand me, God is concerned for us – God cares that we hurt and are sick and that Aunt Tilley's toe is infected. But if that is all we have to bring to God – something is missing. If that is all we focus on – we are not engaged in the purpose of God on the earth. ***I am convinced that when our lives are lit up with His purpose our prayers will be powerful and penetrating.*** They will be full of the word of God and of hope in His working. They will not be shallow insipid things that are only focused on how we are doing. It is good to have an accurate view of how we are doing – but it all must be in relation to the purpose and calling of God in our lives. On this subject Jesus said, *'Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.'* Matthew 6:31-33

It is His kingdom and His purpose we must wrap our lives around – and when that is our focus – and that is our desire – then we know how we ought to pray for the cause of Christ in the world – big, sweeping, Scripture saturated, God-inspired prayers that change the landscape for the kingdom's sake. And then we know how we ought to pray for the all things our Father already knows we need – like healing for infected toes and our daily bread and the clothes on our back and the roof over our head.

And then Paul says that when the call of God broke in on his life and turned his world right-side up: *I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. 18 Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. 19 But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother. 20 (Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.)* Paul is writing this to further his claim that the gospel he preached was not influenced in any way by the apostles in Jerusalem, but I think one thing we need to see from this is that ***we must treat a revelation from heaven with the alone time of study, prayer and meditation it deserves.*** Paul spent time in Arabia – how long we don't know – and the Scriptures say nothing about any preaching or church planting done while he was there. No doubt there were opportunities – but I believe that most of that time was spent in study, prayer and meditation over the things God had spoken into Paul's heart.

Without that confirming time in God's presence in study and prayer and meditation – the revelation we once had on our calling will start to dim – we will find ourselves questioning the call – in the battles we face in this kingdom work we will falter and be tempted to surrender. And there will be battles – God is not calling us to a party but a war. Just look at the lives of any of those saints who walked with God in this life. We need the revelation from heaven – we need to hear the call of God and know the purpose for which He set us apart – and we need to spend time in His presence confirming and consolidating His word to us.

And then Paul writes: *21 Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. 22 I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which were in Christ; 23 but only, they kept hearing, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy." 24 And they were glorifying God because of me.* Paul was still relatively unknown to the greater church in the world of that day – at least by sight. But they all heard about him. And they were glorifying God. Listen to the statement of those thoughts make: ***They heard about Paul – and they glorified God. To the degree that we are engaged in the purpose of God in our lives – to that degree God is glorified in us.*** Conversely it follows that to the degree we are not engaged in the purpose of God – to that degree God is not glorified in us.

John Howard, a contemporary of John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield and others, was 24 when he surrendered his life to Christ and the call of God: ***'Lord I believe; help Thou mine unbelief! Here, on this sacred day, in the dust before the eternal God, I cast my guilty and polluted soul on the sovereign mercy of the Redeemer. Oh, compassionate and divine Lord, save me from the dreadful guilt and power of sin, and accept my solemn, free, and unreserved surrender...make me the everlasting monument of Thy mercy...for ever and ever, Amen and Amen!'***

It was five years later as he was traveling to Lisbon, Portugal to help in the relief effort after a catastrophic earthquake there had killed tens of thousands of people, that God confirmed that call. The British ship he was traveling on was taken by a French mercenary ship and he was seized along with others and thrown into a French prison where he was deprived of food, water and even sunlight. That hellish incarceration awakened Howard to the desperate conditions in the prisons of that day and the degradation and abuse that was inflicted on humans beings, often for petty crimes.

One man he met in prison, who died after rotting there for ten years was in for the crime of owing 14 dollars to a tradesmen. Howard's heart was stirred to change things and the stirring he felt was from God. In the years to come he would stand before parliaments and rulers and lawmakers until he changed the course of history. In Europe, nation after nation enacted prison reform bills and his impact was felt in prisons from England to Turkey. In his journal you read of his desire that God would be glorified – not John Howard – he wanted simply to be a monument to God's mercy.

The point here is that we are not all called to be preachers – we are not all called to be missionaries – but all those whom God has set apart from their mother's wombs are called to be part of His great purpose on the earth. It is too shallow to think of God's call and kingdom purpose as only involving itinerant preaching. Paul himself said that the kingdom of God *'...is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.* Romans 14:7 It was William Wilberforce who, because the purpose of God was foremost in his ambitions, saw as his calling the Reformation of morals in society and the abolition of the slave trade – and he spent his life in the pursuit of God's glory to both ends. And as we are engaged in the spread of the righteousness of God – and the peace of God – and the joy of God on the earth – God is glorified in us.

Oh, may we be those who pray like David Livingstone prayed: ***'Lord, send me anywhere, only go with me. Lay any burden on me, only sustain me. Sever any ties but the tie that binds me to your service and to your heart.'***

Our gracious Father and Lord,

In Your mercy grant that we would joyfully embrace Your calling on our lives. Forgive us Lord, for thinking more of our own comfort and ease instead of Your great purpose. Deliver us from petty concerns and trivial pursuits and enlarge our hearts to wrap them around Your purpose. Ignite a passion to make others glad in You as we have been made glad, and let this be our prayer: Lord, send us anywhere, only go with us. Lay any burden on us, only sustain us. Sever any ties but the tie that binds us to Your service and to Your heart.' we pray in the precious name of Jesus our Savior, 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.**