

No Other Gospel

Lesson Text: Galatians 1:1-12. **Devotional Reading:** Acts 13:26-33.

Background Scripture: Galatians 1.

Time: probably A.D. 48 **Place:** from Syrian Antioch

Galatians 1:1-12

Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—² and all the brothers and sisters with me,

To the churches in Galatia:

³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

⁶ I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷ which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! ⁹ As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!

¹⁰ Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

¹¹ I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. ¹² I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, a student should be able to:

1. Give reasons why there is only one gospel revealed by God.
2. Identify ancient and modern false gospels.
3. Make a commitment to remain faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

INTRODUCTION

Is It Really Good News?

In our Scripture text today, Paul expresses his concern over a school of thought that referred to itself as gospel but wasn't. It called on people to depend on their own righteousness, particularly as expressed in Old Testament law-keeping, to get into Heaven. This message that Christians must fulfill all the Jewish laws was being specifically imposed upon the Gentile converts to Christianity. Paul could not call this good news, because it went back to a system that could not save people in the first place.

Let's say you and a companion are stranded on a desert island. Your companion says, "Guess what, there is a ship willing to pick us up. It is only one hundred miles away. The problem is we have to swim to meet it." That would not be good news. But if the ship has promised to come and pick you up, that would be good news. Certain teachers had been telling the Christians in Galatia that they had to, in effect, "swim" for their salvation. That can hardly be good news.

Paul was the ideal person to address this issue for at least three reasons. First, he himself had tried the system of salvation through keeping the law of Moses. If there was anyone who knew the fruitlessness of trying to get to Heaven by rigorous law-keeping, it was Paul. He described himself as "blameless" concerning "the righteousness which is in the law." Yet he came to realize that only "the righteousness which is of God by faith" is worth

possessing (Philippians 3:6, 9).

Second, Paul was the right person to convey this message to Gentile Christians since, although he was an exemplary Jew, he had grown up in the Gentile world. In fact, when Jesus appeared to Paul (then Saul) on the road to Damascus, He told him that he was being sent to the Gentiles (Acts 26:17).

Third, Paul was equipped to deal with this matter because he was acquainted with the Galatians by reason of his first missionary journey. During that time, he had introduced them to the gospel of grace. They were more likely to listen to Paul because his earlier conduct among them had testified to his concern for their spiritual welfare.

LESSON BACKGROUND

False teaching has been around since the beginning of the church. Sometimes it is open and flagrant; at other times it is very subtle. We can be sure of this: where there is the true, there will be the false; where there is the genuine, there will be the counterfeit. Even though Paul preached the "truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:5), his steps were constantly dogged by various false teachers.

Galatians confronts the teaching of those known as Judaizers, who essentially wanted to make Christianity into another Jewish sect. Though they claimed belief in Jesus, they wanted Gentile converts to keep all the rules and regulations of the Mosaic law. In effect, they wanted to Judaize the Christian faith.

In all likelihood, the Judaizers were from Palestine and closely associated with the Pharisees (Acts 15:5). In A.D. 49, Paul and Barnabas were sent by the church at Antioch to Jerusalem to discuss this very issue. Some were actually saying, "*Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved*" (v. 1).

The Judaizers were not merely suggesting that keeping some of the Mosaic law might be commendable; rather, they were demanding conformity to the law as a matter of salvation. This meant that they were adding to God's simple plan of salvation through Christ alone.

Paul's Authority (Galatians 1:1-5)

His Calling (vs. 1, 2)

Formerly known as Saul, the Apostle Paul was a great champion for Gentile Christianity. After his life-changing experience on the road to Damascus, he immediately began proclaiming that Jesus was the Son of God -(Acts 9:20).

At the time of Paul's conversion, it was revealed that part of his mission was to proclaim Christ to the Gentile, or non-Jewish, world (v. 15). He is even referred to as the "apostle of the Gentiles" (Rom. 11:13; cf. 15:16). Since the word "apostle" literally means "one sent forth," he was sent forth to preach the Word to the Gentiles (Acts 14:27).

Prior to accepting Christ, Paul was not only a law-abiding Jew but a Pharisee as well. As he said, "*I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee*" (26:5). He had been very proud of his religious heritage and earthly accomplishments. After surrendering to Christ as Lord and Savior, though, Paul concluded that these things were rubbish and could not save him (Phil. 3:3-9). Paul realized from his own personal experience that something more than outward conformity to the Mosaic law was necessary to bring one into a right relationship with God almighty.

Paul was not an apostle because he had decided that this was what he wanted to do. Rather, God chose him for this task. His call to apostleship is reminiscent of the call of such Old Testament prophets as Jeremiah (Jer. 1:5) and Amos (Amos 7:14,15). The risen Christ had appeared to Paul and commissioned him as an apostle. Not only was he called by God, but the message he preached also came by means of direct revelation.

While a call to the ministry today might not be as dramatic as Paul's, those who preach the gospel need a sense of divine calling for this mission. The message preached today does not come by direct revelation but from the revealed will of God in Scripture.

1. What did Paul emphasize about his apostleship (Galatians 1:1)?

Most of Paul's letters were written to individuals or to a single local church. In this case, however, his letter was addressed to "churches," that is, a number of local congregations, in a particular geographical region identified as "Galatia."

Since the term "Galatia" was used in both a political and an ethnic sense in Paul's day, it is not precisely clear whom Paul was addressing. Scholars still debate the merits of either a north or a south Galatian destination. Since we know that Paul's first missionary journey took him through the southern part of Galatia (Acts 14:1-7), that is the more likely location of the churches of Galatia he wrote to. These would have included the churches in Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe.

Who the "*brothers and sisters*" (v. 2) were who were with Paul is unknown. In other letters, Paul mentioned the names of some of those who were with him (1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1), but he did not do so here. Had he done so, we might have a better idea of when the letter was penned. Most scholars believe that Paul wrote to the Galatian churches sometime between A.D. 48 and A.D. 58, making it one of the earliest epistles of the New Testament to be written.

2. Where were the "churches of Galatia" (v. 2) located?

Paul began his epistle in a manner customary to the writing habits of the first century. First the writer and recipients were identified; then a salutation was offered.

The words "grace" and "peace" (v. 3) were common salutations among both Greeks and Jews. For Christians, though, both of these words took on deeper meaning. If anyone had an appreciation for God's grace, it was Paul. Having been a persecutor of the church, he knew that God could have brought swift judgment upon him instead of calling him to preach what he had attempted to destroy.

Being more than merely the absence of conflict, peace denotes well-being of the soul. Because of Christ, "*we have peace with God*" (Rom. 5:1) and are at peace with one another (Eph. 2:14).

Another customary feature in ancient letters was a word of thanksgiving. Although found in other epistles (Rom. 1:8; 1 Cor. 1:4; Phil. 1:3), this feature is conspicuously absent in Galatians. Because the Galatians were being led astray by false teachers, Paul may not have been able to offer any word of thanksgiving at this time.

The grace and peace enjoyed by the Galatians came from "*God the Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Gal. 1:3).

3. What was the significance in Paul using the words "grace" and "peace"? (v. 3)

Paul now describes the ministry of Jesus using three phrases. First, he says that Jesus gave himself for our sins. Jesus' death on the cross was not an accident. It was for that reason that He came to earth. To view His death as simply a heroic act or as the death of a martyr is to miss its divinely intended purpose. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:3 stating the fact that "*Christ died for our sins.*"

Second, Jesus is described as the One who came to deliver us from this present evil world. The Greek word translated world is rendered more accurately by the word *age*. Thus Paul is not describing how Jesus will one day take us away from this planet (though He certainly will do that). His primary focus is on Jesus' deliverance of us from the evil system that pervades this planet. The "world of evil" is one under the control of the "evil one,"

or Satan. A person who becomes a Christian becomes part of a different realm—one that is "not of this world" (John 18:36).

Third, Jesus acted according to the will of God and our Father. On one occasion Jesus stated, *"My food is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work"* (John 4:34). As noted earlier, Jesus' death was part of the Father's plan—"the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23).

4. How did Paul describe the ministry of Jesus (vs. 4,5)?

False Gospel (Galatians 1:6-9)

Paul often emphasized the fact that we are saved by God's grace. In short, we are not saved because we are good enough to be saved but because God extended to lost sinners the offer of redemption.

Paul was astonished that these believers were defecting from the true gospel "so soon." This probably indicates that his letter was written shortly after the founding of these churches. We could say that they were acting like *traitors, deserting the gospel that Paul had so faithfully taught them.*

"He called you to this through our gospel" is probably a reference to God, who calls us to salvation through the gospel (2 Thess. 2:13,14).

5. Why was Paul astonished at some of the Galatian believers (v. 6)?

It was most likely that of the "Judaizers." These were first-century Jewish Christians who believed in Jesus, but also believed that everyone needed to keep all the Old Testament laws as well. This would particularly include the rite of circumcision. At the gathering in Jerusalem often called the "Jerusalem Conference," the position of the Judaizers was rejected by the leaders of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-29). They declared that Gentiles could come to Christ alone, without the added requirement of keeping the Old Testament law.

Paul describes this gospel as another gospel. There were two words Paul could have used for another. One would mean "another of the same kind." His other choice would be to speak of "another of a different kind." Paul uses the latter word. Thus, this other gospel is so heinous in Paul's eyes that he sees it as totally different from the genuine gospel.

6. What was the other gospel that the Galatians were embracing (v. 6)?

This is the Greek word *altos* and means "another of the same sort" (Vine). What Paul was saying was that the message proclaimed by the Judaizers was not just another version of the same gospel but a completely different message. Paul taught salvation by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8); the Judaizers taught salvation by law through works.

What the false teachers preached was not the gospel; that is, it was not good news at all. As Peter declared, *"Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."* (Acts 15:10,11).

To add to the plan of salvation or to deny the basic facts of the gospel message is to *"change the good news about the Messiah"* (Gal. 1:7). This does not mean that believers will always agree on every issue (as we saw in last week's lesson). We should, however, agree on the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Christ's teachings and obedience to His commands cannot be compromised.

7. How is the word translated "another" (v. 7) a different word from the one used in the preceding verse?

This is one of several strong warnings in the Bible not to alter God's message (cf. Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:5,6; Matt. 5:18-19; Rev. 22:18). To do so is to be placed under a divine curse.

Paul reinforces his statement by adding that even if an angel from heaven should preach another gospel, he should be sentenced to this same judgment. It does not matter how attractive, appealing, or eloquent a teacher may be; if the content of the message contradicts the true gospel, then both the messenger and the false message come under condemnation.

One way that cult leaders and other false teachers maintain their followings is by convincing their devotees that their teachings come directly from God. Sadly, their disciples seem willing to give blind allegiance to these false prophets. Paul said, *"but test all things. Hold on to what is good."* (1 Thess. 5:21).

Since Paul and other apostles received the gospel directly from the Lord, they knew that any message different from the original gospel was a perversion. The Judaizers were adding to the gospel by requiring circumcision and other rituals of the Mosaic law. This was a distortion of the gospel and so serious that Paul pronounced a curse on those who did this.

The phrase *"a curse"* (Gal. 1:8) is the Greek anathema and originally meant something that was offered or dedicated to God. Later it came to have the meaning of "something yielded up to the wrath of God, surrendered to the curse of God" (Ridderbos, Galatians, Eerdmans).

At first, verse 9 seems to be simply a repetition of verse 8. But verse 8 seems to be presenting a scenario that was highly improbable, while verse 9 was a warning to those in Galatia who were currently preaching a gospel different from the original. The original gospel message has not changed over the past twenty centuries. Someone put it this way: "If it is new, it is not true; if it is true, it is not new!" This is why we *"contend for the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all"* (Jude 1:3).

8. What should we do if an angel were to appear to us with a message contrary to the gospel? (vs. 8,9)?

Favor of God (Galatians 1:10-12)

The word "favor" can be translated "persuade." Therefore, Paul was asking, *"For am I now trying to win the favor of men or of God?"* Prior to accepting Christ, he sought the favor of men and sought to please them. He now had a higher aim: to please God as the "slave of Christ." The word "slave" literally meant "servant."

"Paul was not out to win people by telling them what they like to hear. Besides, his preaching of this gospel had brought him into sharp conflict with others. It was therefore the motive of obedience to God that prompted him to speak as he had spoken" (Ridderbos).

9. Who was Paul seeking to please (v. 10)?

The gospel Paul proclaimed to the Galatians was *"not after human thought,"* that is, not something mankind made up.

10. What does it mean that Paul's gospel was "not after human thought" (v. 11)?

That Paul *"did not receive it from a human source"* (v. 12) indicates divine, not human, authority. That he was not taught by others meant that Paul had no human instructors, such as the other apostles (2:6).

Paul's message came by direct *"revelation from Jesus Christ"* (1:12). While this included his Damascus Road experience (Acts 9:1-8), Galatians 1: 15-18 indicates that his time in Arabia may have been spent receiving divine revelation from the Lord. We also know that the Lord appeared to him at other times as well (Acts 18:9-10; 22:17-21; 2 Cor. 12:1-4).

11. What is the significance of the message coming by "revelation" (v. 12)?

CONCLUSION

No one can make improvements on something that is already perfect. This is certainly true of the gospel message. Paul had received the good news through special revelation from Christ Himself. He had passed this message on to the Galatians. He minced no words in defending this as the one and only gospel. Many charming teachers present themselves as God's messengers. Some have clever and interesting things to say. We must remember that the gospel message is absolute and cannot be altered. Like Paul, we must stand for the truth.

PRAYER

Gracious Father, we thank You that we do not have to depend on our righteousness to enter into Heaven. If we did, there would be no good news for us. Your gospel is the best news we have ever received. We thank You for Jesus, the author and bearer of this good news, and we pray in His name. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

"[Jesus] gave himself for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age" (Galatians 1:4).