

February 1, 2009
4th Sunday after Epiphany

No Other Gospel Saves!

Pastor Michael Ewart
Text: Galatians 1:1-10

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I want to talk to you today about something that can be difficult understand. If you grasp this truth and keep it in your mind, it will dramatically alter the way you view the world, and the way you deal with others. What I'm going to talk to you about is not difficult to understand because it's complicated or abstract. It's hard to understand because it's countercultural.

Modern American culture preaches tolerance, acceptance, broad-mindedness. Do what you feel is right. Follow your gut. Be true to yourself. Be politically correct. Accept all ideas and viewpoints. Education is the path to enlightenment, and will accomplish the moral advancement of society. Whatever path or belief system makes you a better person is the one you should follow. That is popular opinion today. And it does influence us.

But despite what society says, it (and we) don't have difficulty, nevertheless, in identifying some beliefs and ideas as blatantly wrong. Even a society that's abandoned moral absolutes seems to be absolutely confident in its judgment, for example, that the Muslim terrorist kills others is worshipping a false God. And we feel confident in saying that man is going to receive eternal punishment. Likewise, the child molester, the murderer, the con-man... their punishment is deserved.

Where things get challenging, harder for us to understand and even more difficult to explain to others is when we start talking about "good" people who are not Christian. What about the Hindu or Buddhist doctor who got straight A's in school, became a cancer research specialist, moved to Africa to help the poverty stricken in free clinics, and who gives 70% of his earnings to help the poor? Here's a person doing the right thing a lot of the time. Here is a person that perhaps seems to be far better than you or I, right?

The world would challenge us: "Is he on the wrong path? Is this someone whom God would actually send to hell? Do you dare to judge his beliefs as wrong and damnable? Would you actually dare to try teach this man a thing or two about getting right with the Creator of the Universe? Are you so narrow-minded, intolerant, strict, politically incorrect, and judgmental that you would say this man is *wrong*." These, friends, are the challenging questions that you perhaps have wrestled with yourself, or that someone else has challenged you with. The answer is closely related with the truth we established at the beginning. The answer is contained in our sermon text. Let's not squirm and get uncomfortable. Are there many paths to God? Let's let God speak. And we will humbly listen.

Galatians 1:1-10 *1 Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— 2 and all the brothers 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 by 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 him be eternally condemned! 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 him be eternally condemned!*¹⁰ Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.

The congregations in Galatia were in great distress because of the new, perverted “gospel” which some men were proclaiming. Who were these false teachers, and what was their message? Acts 15:1 summarizes for us: “Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.’” Some Jewish converts to Christianity insisted that **in addition** to Christ, the believer also must do something. So we’re not talking about here even Hindus or Muslims. We’re talking about people who considered themselves Christians. They said that a true believer, in addition to trusting Christ, must be circumcised, according to Jewish custom. They also said that a true believer must keep certain Old Testament rules and regulations. If a person would do these things in addition to believing in Christ, he would be saved. These Christian Jews who insisted on maintaining Jewish customs were called Judaizers.

So the problem Paul was addressing was this: The true gospel of salvation by grace alone (and not by our works) was being attacked. In its place, the Judaizers were preaching that salvation comes about through a joint effort of God and man. God does part, but man also must contribute something in order to be saved. Does it make that much difference if the gospel is changed in this way? This is so minor, isn’t it? By Paul’s language, we know this other “gospel” was not acceptable. Let’s look closer at what he wrote.

The common opening for letters at Paul’s time was to list (1) the writer, (2) the recipients, and (3) a greeting. We see that Paul followed this format, but in doing so he already began to defend the truth of the Gospel. Paul writes, “*Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.*” Paul makes it clear that his authority does not come from man, but from God himself. When Paul spoke, he spoke with the authority of God! His teaching was from God, and therefore it must be accepted as true.

At first we see that Paul’s greeting is similar to his other letters. ‘*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*’ It’s one we commonly use in our sermons. Then Paul quickly expands on the gospel message so that the Galatians once again remember its beauty, comfort and simplicity. He wrote: “*[Jesus] gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age.*” What is the gospel which the Galatians were forgetting? Paul summarizes it this way: Jesus gave himself for our sins. We don’t and can’t contribute to our salvation. Jesus did it all. Jesus saved us **from** sin for what purpose? “*to rescue us from the present evil age.*” Jesus’ work was a rescue mission. We like to read stories of great rescues. Someone is trapped or in trouble, but a brave person risks his own life to save them. The essence of the gospel is that we are trapped in sin and we have no way out. But in a spectacular rescue mission, Jesus gave himself for our sins in order to rescue us. He frees us from that which we could not free ourselves. If the Gospel says that Jesus rescued us, that means there must be nothing we can take credit for. If we could have helped ourselves, we wouldn’t have needed rescuing!

This gracious work of Christ was all “*according to the will of our God and Father.*” Our salvation was planned and accomplished from beginning to end by God the Father. Note that our salvation does not in any part depend on our will, our works or our contribution. It is entirely because of God’s desire, plan, work, love and sacrifice that we are saved. The grace and love of God the Father and Son calls forth praise from Paul, “*to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*”

Normally in Paul’s letters, he continues with a prayer or word of commendation to the

congregation. In this letter, however, there is a dangerous error which must be dealt with immediately. Paul gets right to the point: *“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— which is really no gospel at all.”* Paul is shocked at how the Galatians are turning from the true gospel. He tells them, *“You are rebelling against God! He called you by the gospel which taught you that salvation is entirely by grace found in Christ, yet you are embracing a gospel which teaches something entirely different! In fact, what you are believing can’t even be called gospel.”*

Please take note of Paul’s firm language. Paul doesn’t call the new teaching an addition to the gospel, or even a distortion of the gospel. Paul says that what they are teaching is a **different** gospel! In fact, by changing the gospel message, the gospel was completely lost. Remember how the Judaizers changed the gospel. They said that in addition to God’s grace in Christ, a person must be circumcised and keep certain Old Testament regulations. By adding works to grace, the Judaizers destroyed the gospel! And as the Galatians began to depart from the true gospel, the result was that they were deserting God.

This idea is crucial to understand. There is only one way to stand holy and righteous before our God who is holy and righteous. Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins to rescue us. His sacrifice was all sufficient. It was complete. It was lacking nothing. It takes us 100% from the sinner camp, completely into the “saint” camp. His sacrifice doesn’t start us on the road of salvation. It completely accomplishes our salvation. If someone teaches or believes that we in any small part also contribute toward our salvation, they have taken that much credit away from Christ. It’s no longer Christ alone who saves, then. It’s Christ and I. And I’m no longer saved by grace alone. But grace along with my own efforts. It’s no longer God who gets the whole credit for my salvation, but God must share some of that credit with me. God is no longer all loving if he hasn’t completely saved me. He’s only partially loving. Add anything to “Christ for us” and you no longer have the gospel. You have a different gospel that is no gospel at all.

Paul continues by strongly encouraging the Galatians not to accept a different gospel. *“But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! 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 him be eternally condemned!”* Is the gospel something changeable? Is it something open to interpretation or different opinions? Is the gospel something which needs to be reshaped and adjusted to each generation? Is the gospel something that can be stated in many different ways by many different religions? Absolutely not! Paul says emphatically that the gospel cannot be changed or modified in any way. **NO ONE** has the right to change the Gospel. Paul says, *“If I or another apostle preaches something new or different, may God damn us to hell. Even if an angel from heaven comes and preaches a gospel different than what you have heard, let that angel be damned eternally in hell!”*

Paul’s point is this: the preacher of the message must not be taken into consideration when determining the validity of the message. It is the **content** of the message we must always focus our attention upon. If a man is full of energy, spirit, and emotion, is enthusiastic and confident, if his eloquent, emotional words speak to our heart, and yet he preaches a gospel – a message – other than what we have learned and believed, we know that this man is a false prophet. Even if a glorious angel from heaven came to us with a new message, we are to ignore him, and listen to what God tells us in the Bible. God’s gospel is unchangeable!

Now what does this all mean? Let’s go back to the touch situation I mentioned at the

beginning. A Hindu or Buddhist doctor is a great man. He's smart. He's humble. He works hard. He sacrifices his own comfort and convenience to help others. Is he okay with God? Should we be open-minded and tolerant and acknowledge his path is different than ours, but it is a good path? The apostle Paul says, "Absolutely not!"

Now don't misunderstand me. I rejoice that this man feels conscience-bound to do so much for his fellow man. I rejoice that he is making this world a better place. I would really rejoice if he moved in as my next door neighbor because that's exactly the kind of neighbor I would like to have. But the question is, is this man right with God? And again we must answer with certainty, "NO!"

Why not? For all the good that man is doing, he is not perfect. Am I right? Do you think even that good man still is sometimes discontent? ...speaks ill of others? ...loses his temper? He isn't perfect in his relationships with others, is he? And consider his relationship with God. God has revealed who he is. Does this man know God in that way? No. Does he know, love and honor Jesus Christ, God's Son? No. This man, then, breaks the 1st Commandment, "You shall have no other gods." In his failure to know and worship the one true God, he lives in a state of rebellion. Finally, this man will not be chastised for the good he did. He will stand before God and be held accountable for the sins he committed.

Think about this: Is God absolutely holy? Does God compromise with sin and rebellion? He cannot. He will not. If God were to ignore the sins of this "good" doctor we described, God would be compromising with sin. He would be turning a blind eye to unrighteousness. God cannot do that. The man cannot live with God in eternity. He lacks the holiness God requires. He is not fit.

The man I described along with the real people we know and meet each day, need the blood of Jesus Christ to cover over their sin and guilt. Those whom the world considers "good" are still nowhere near the perfect holiness required by our perfectly holy God. There is only one way to be saved. There is only one way for guilt to be removed. It is the way revealed by God in Scriptures. It is the Jesus, God's Son, who removes our guilt forever. He is the only way the only truth, the only life.

Is this narrow-minded? If there's one available exit when the house is on fire, are you narrow minded in insisting people use that exit and only that exit? Are we being intolerant? Since when is it good to tolerate error, ignorance and behavior that endangers a person and others? Are we being judgmental? If standing up for the truth is being judgmental, then I guess that's what we are. Are we being too strict? Not if there's only one right way, and it's the way to be saved and have eternal life.

Paul knew he wasn't going to win any popularity contests with the true gospel. And we're not going to win the approval of men either. But we are going to win the approval of God. There is no other gospel that saves. And thank God for that! God in his love decided to do 100% of what it took to save us. He accomplished it through the perfect life and innocent, shed blood of Christ. He confirmed through his glorious resurrection. He revealed it to you and to me, and tasked us with sharing it with others.

Convinced of this gospel, dear friends, renew your efforts to share this saving, beautiful, unchanging gospel with everyone you meet! It's critical that we do so. It's a matter of life and death. May God give us courage and determination to share the true gospel with all. Amen.

The peace of God, which he gives us in the beautiful Gospel, will keep your hearts and minds strong in your faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.