

# Galatians: No Man's Gospel

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, we talk a lot at Advent about being a gospel-centered church. It's core to our vision, core to our identity. We want to be a gospel-centered community, and we want to plant other churches that are gospel-centered churches.

And so it's important from time to time in the life of our church that we come back to that idea and re-clarify what that actually means, because it would be easy to use a phrase like that, but to, over time, lose a sense of its meaning.

So it's important that we come back and remind ourselves what does it mean to be a gospel-centered community. And we've been looking at Paul's letter to the Galatians in order to refresh our understanding of this idea.

And so we're going to be looking this week at Galatians 1, verses 9 to 17, and we're going to see that part of what it means to be a gospel-centered community is that we are people who know the difference between the true gospel that comes from Jesus delivered through the apostles across time down to us, that we would know the difference between that gospel and what you might consider to be counterfeit gospels or false gospels, versions of the gospel that have been distorted or twisted such that they lose their meaning.

They're no longer recognizable as the real thing. And so that's exactly what Paul is talking about in this part of Galatians. He's talking about the true gospel versus the rise of false gospels.

[ 1 : 32 ] And so this passage is going to show us three things. We're going to dive in a little deeper. It's going to show us the allure of false gospels. Why are they so attractive and so prominent throughout the life of the church?

Then the danger of false gospels. Why does this matter? What's the big deal? And then finally, the power of the true gospel in contrast to the counterfeits.

So let's pray and then we'll open God's word together. Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you for your people, your community. And we know that you promise to do your work in us through your word, that your Holy Spirit is here in our midst and that you can use your word like a surgical instrument.

And we need to be under your word tonight, Lord. We need heart surgery, all of us here. And so we pray that by the power of your Spirit, you would do just that, Lord, in each of us as we need.

And we pray this for your glory, Lord, and we pray it in the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen. So first we're going to talk about the allure of false gospels. And I want to give you a little context so you understand what's going on at this point in Paul's letter.

[ 2 : 45 ] Paul had come into Galatia to preach the good news of the gospel. And as we said last week, for those who were here, Galatia was a very divided place. It was in south-central Turkey. There was religious division.

There was ethnic division, racial division, and very divided society. And so Paul came and he began to announce the good news of the gospel. And he began to say this. There aren't many gods that are and goddesses who are affiliated with different people groups based on their race or their background or their ethnicity.

There's only one God. And that one God made all of you. And that God has had a plan since he laid down the foundations of the earth. And it's been a mystery up until now.

But through Jesus Christ, the Son of God, God's plan has been revealed for all to see. Through the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus, God has unveiled his desire that he would be the one father of the whole world.

And so Jesus, after his resurrection, began to call into existence one great worldwide family from all the peoples of the earth.

[ 3 : 56 ] And that the great unfolding vision of salvation history is that that one great family would be united around the glory of God. And this is the vision that Paul lays out.

And people hear this and they rightly understand that this turns everything upside down. This is society-altering, upheaval kind of news.

And so some people were thrilled. Some people were excited. The Gentiles in particular realized that Paul's message to them was that if they wanted a relationship with God, they no longer had to become Jewish, come under the law of Moses, be circumcised in order to then know God, that they could simply be baptized and immediately become Christians and part of this great worldwide family.

And so this message essentially said that there was no longer any difference between Jews and Gentiles. And so people, some people were excited about this, but many other people were deeply troubled by this.

And so opponents had risen up in the church, other teachers who were contradicting Paul, and they were trying to discredit Paul, to demonstrate that he had no authority to say these things.

[ 5 : 09 ] And so they were accusing Paul of dumbing down the gospel, of altering it and making it more palatable to his Gentile audience, that he was essentially a people pleaser.

He was saying, Gentiles, you don't have to become Jewish. You can just go straight into Christianity. And they said, you're just trying to make them happy. You're trying to placate them.

And so that's why Paul says in verse 10, am I seeking the approval of man or God?

If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. Can't have it both ways. Right?

But I want to pause here to point something out. But even though Paul is not dumbing down the gospel, and even though Paul is not altering the gospel to make it more palatable, throughout the history of the church for 2,000 years, many people have done just that.

They have altered the message of the gospel to make it more palatable, to make it more user-friendly than the real thing. And just a couple of examples to illustrate what I'm talking about.

One of the ways the gospel has been altered and is often preached in our culture right now is a version of the gospel that you might think of as the therapeutic gospel. It's a reframing of Christianity around a kind of self-help culture.

[ 6 : 24 ] The idea being that God's primary desire for us is that we would be happy and that we would be fulfilled and that we would live meaningful lives. And that God's role in that is to essentially be our helper who is there to aid us in living the best life we can possibly live, our best life now.

And, of course, this is much more palatable than the real gospel, which actually has a deep theology of suffering. Right? The real gospel which says, although God may be concerned and desirous of our happiness, he cares far more about our holiness.

And that, in fact, sometimes our holiness comes at the expense of our momentary happiness. And that sometimes God does work in our hearts that can only be done through suffering.

And that somehow suffering is a part of how God redeems the world. That's not a very palatable message to many people. The therapeutic gospel is much more attractive. Right?

Another example of this would be a kind of version of the gospel. I think it's very popular, especially in our city, is what you might think of as the churchless gospel. Right? This is the idea that the only thing that matters is Jesus and my personal relationship with him.

[ 7 : 38 ] And that can be had anywhere. And the church is seen as a kind of secondary or maybe even an obstacle to my authentic spirituality.

Now, this is, of course, very attractive to many people for obvious reasons. Why? Because being involved in a local church is hard. And it's inconvenient.

And it takes a lot of time and a lot of energy and a whole lot of patience. And you've got to be around people and put up with people that you don't necessarily like. And you get frustrated when church leaders make decisions that you disagree with.

And then you start hearing about needs in the community. And you start to feel obligated to get involved. And that's incredibly inconvenient. Right? Because we're already all overworked. Right? And so it's much easier to say, well, I'll just sit at home. And I'll listen to sermons online. And I'll hang out with my Christian friends from time to time. And that's my version of Christian faithfulness.

[ 8 : 35 ] Right? Much more attractive, much more user-friendly than the real gospel, which has no concept of a lone Christian. Right? In the New Testament, you cannot find that. Right? The assumption is that if you're a Christian, that you are actively a part of a local expression of the

church.

That you're in God's family. That you're a part of that body. And that you are a part of that body playing the role that you've been gifted and called to play. Right? But that's much less palatable, much less user-friendly.

Two more examples I'll give you simply because they go together. They're opposite ends, opposite extremes of the same continuum. On one end, you have the social gospel. On the other end, you have what might be considered the quietest gospel.

Right? So the social gospel says what? Social gospel says Christian faithfulness, what it really looks like, is going out and seeking social reform and renewal through activism.

That that's what Christians should be about. That's what Jesus really came to do. But it minimizes or altogether omits talk of personal sin, personal salvation, personal holiness.

[ 9 : 42 ] The focus is on bringing change in the name of Jesus to our society. On the other hand, you have the quietest gospel, which is the exact opposite. The focus is entirely on my salvation, on my getting right with God, on me being a part of the church and worshipping God.

But it says that caring for the vulnerable and the poor and seeking to be activist and to bring societal change, that that's not the work of the church. And what we see in both cases is a distorting of the true gospel.

Because if we understand the true gospel, we recognize that it's both. Right? It begins with me confessing my sin and being reconciled to God through the blood of Christ. But it doesn't end there.

Right? With it comes a mandate to go out and to minister in the name of Christ. To care for the vulnerable. To care for the poor. To try to free the oppressed. To try to bring institutional and societal change wherever we can to glorify Christ.

Right? It's a both and. But that's much less palatable. It's much less user friendly. And so these various versions of the gospel, these distortions of the gospel, are very popular.

[ 10 : 50 ] They're very widespread. And if you understand these examples, you'll recognize they all contain grains of truth. But where they go wrong is that they begin to overemphasize certain aspects of the gospel and underemphasize or omit other aspects of the gospel.

And over time they become so distorted that they cease to be the gospel in any meaningful sense.

Now you may hear this and you may think, well, who in the world cares?

You know, why split doctrinal hairs? You know, theologians care about this. Pastors care about this. But why should I care about this? And this is where we need to take note of Paul's language and his tone in this letter.

Look at verse 9. Paul says this, Now Paul's dramatic.

He can be intense. We know this about Paul. But I don't think he's just being dramatic here. The word accursed is the word anathema.

[ 12 : 03 ] Let him be anathema. Paul is invoking a curse. Right? He's calling down a curse on these teachers of the false gospels. And so we have to ask ourselves, why is Paul so upset?

And it begins to make sense when we understand how dangerous false gospels can be. We talked last week about the fact that the way we define the gospel, that sets our course as individuals.

And it sets our course as a community. It determines and shapes everything else about how we live, about how we spend our time and money, about what we prioritize, about the issues that we care about and how we respond to them, about how we respond and treat people who disagree with us.

It shapes all of that. And here's why false gospels are so dangerous. They're dangerous because they promise blessing. But over time they become curses.

They promise blessings. But over time they become curses rather than blessings. And I want to give you just one example so you can see what I'm talking about in action.

[ 13 : 08 ] Let's go back to the social gospel, what we talked about a little while ago. Remember, the social gospel is the emphasizing of seeking social renewal through activism. But most of the time it either minimizes or completely omits any focus on personal sin, personal change, personal holiness.

The focus is on what we can do in society, what we should be doing in society. So let's take that and, you know, you think, well, you know, at the end of the day, if you get a bunch of people to go out and start doing good like that, how could that be a bad thing?

Right? Maybe we should be doing more of that. This is a great idea. Who would argue with this? And at face value I would agree. But let's take this approach and apply it to a sensitive, highly divisive issue like racism.

Right? So here's the question I want to ask you. What happens when you take a bunch of would-be Christians and you tell them to go out and eradicate racism wherever they see it in society, but you omit any talk about personal sin or the need to repent?

What do you get? Right? Just think about that. What do you get? Well, you get a bunch of people that get charged up. They get fired up. They want to go out. They want to make change in the world. And they begin to go out and they begin to call out instances of racism wherever they see it. [14:28] It could be in institutions. It could be in traditions. It could be in their own family, in their own friend group. They begin to identify it everywhere. And they begin to try to bring change out there.

But the entire time, they are likely to remain completely blind to their own sin, to the own ways in which they might be complicit. Right?

And so what happens when you have a culture like this is you're familiar with the term woke. Right? Somebody to become aware of their privilege, to become aware of all of the instances of injustice they were maybe blind to before.

Right? Now, being woke is generally considered to be a good thing. But what you have when you have a bunch of people who are sent out to make a difference with no focus on their own sin, with no focus on their own need to repent, is you have a kind of pharisaical wokeness.

Right? What was the issue with the Pharisees? Well, they cared way more about external appearance than they did inward heart change. Right? Jesus calls them whitewashed tunes for a reason.

[15:33] Right? They look good on the outside, but they're corrupt on the inside. Right? And so what you have, what the social gospel would actually produce in this instance would be a culture of pharisaical wokeness.

People who are much more concerned about appearing woke and earning that badge on social media than actually changing internally. Internally. And so this is one way that we begin to see the danger of a false gospel and how it can promise blessing and yet end up cursing us and end up bringing and doing more harm than good.

Because the social gospel, just like all false gospels, it doesn't actually change hearts. False gospels produce Pharisees. That's what they do. True. They produce people who are good at acting righteous and appearing righteous, but with no real heart change on the inside.

Right? See, the true gospel, by contrast, always calls us to begin the same way. Do you want to be a part of the solution in the world? Do you want to be a part of making a difference? Do you want to care for the vulnerable? Do you want to engage issues like racism?

Do you want to do these kinds of things? For those of us for whom that's even a choice. Right? It has to start with you. It has to start with you recognizing your sin. It has to start with you going to your knees, like we do every week, and confessing, seeking the mercy of God.

[16:55] And what this does to your heart over time is, when it comes to an issue like racism, which is so sensitive and so fraught and so divisive, it means that over time, as we're regularly confessing and as we're regularly repenting, we become people who are very quick to admit our own fault.

But we're very, very, very slow to point our finger. We're very slow to accuse anyone else. Our gut instinct, our knee-jerk response, is to look inside, first and foremost.

And, you know, it's no coincidence that most true revivals throughout history in the church, most real revivals, if you look all across church history, lots of revivals and lots of different things happening, right?

So it's hard to really compare them because they're all so different from one another. But I'll tell you one thing that they have in common. There's not a single revival anywhere that I know of that began when people started calling out sin in other people.

That has never brought revival. What has brought revival is when people individually and corporately begin to confess their sin. That's what brings revival.

[18:03] So we have to understand this and as we think about our own culture and our own context, what this would look like in our church. What we need to understand is false gospels are powerless to deal with sin and so they leave us unchanged.

And then we can contrast that with the true gospel which alone has the power to deal with sin and to change hearts. And we see that loud and clear in the example of Paul's life.

Paul essentially lays out his autobiography and it's a story of profound change. As I said a little while ago, Paul had opponents in Galatia who were trying to discredit him by saying that his understanding of the gospel is based on second-hand knowledge.

In other words, they're saying this guy isn't really an apostle. He became a Christian and then he went and he started listening to what the other apostles were saying and he got some of it right but he got some of it wrong and he's kind of mixed up and so you shouldn't listen to it.

And Paul's saying, no. In fact, I came face-to-face with Jesus and it was from Jesus that I learned the entire gospel that I am now preaching to you. And he tells his story so that they will realize that he didn't go to Jerusalem.

[ 19 : 19 ] He didn't go and sit under the teachings. He had no contact with any other apostles. He immediately began to preach. Well, almost immediately. You'll see what I mean. So Paul is making this case.

And so in verse 13, he describes his face-to-face encounter with Jesus. For you have heard of my former life in Jerusalem. I'm sorry. You have heard of my former life in Judaism.

How I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people. So extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.

So Paul had made a name for himself and built his career as a persecutor of the gospel. And then what happens is through a face-to-face encounter with Jesus, that so radically changed Paul that he went from being a persecutor of the gospel to being a preacher of the gospel.

So we begin to ask, how could that have had such a profound impact on him and change him so much, a 180-degree shift in his life? And he says this, But when he who had set me apart before I was born and who called me by his grace was pleased to reveal his son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone.

[ 20 : 36 ] So he said, I didn't go up and misunderstand the teaching of the apostles. Nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me. But I went away into Arabia.

Arabia. What? Arabia? I remember reading this for the first time and thinking, what in the world does that have to do with anything?

Why Arabia? So I had to do some digging. Guess what's in Arabia? Mount Sinai. So most commentators say that what Paul's talking about here is this, that he has a face-to-face encounter with Jesus.

And then, immediately, he takes a trip into Arabia and he goes to Mount Sinai. Now, what is Mount Sinai? Mount Sinai is the place where God defined his relationship with his people.

He gave them the law. And he said, I want to be your God and I want you to be my people. And the law was a way of constituting and forming his people into his unique, set-apart community.

[ 21 : 39 ] And so the law was the definition of that relationship. And so this was at the very center of the Jewish identity and what it meant to have a relationship with God.

So Paul goes to Mount Sinai and he begins to contemplate all of the implications of Jesus Christ. Here's what one commentator says. Scott McKnight says, He seems to have stayed there for three years.

We see that in verse 18. And in this period of withdrawal, as he meditated on the Old Testament Scriptures, on the facts of the life and the death of Jesus that he already knew, and on his experience of conversion, the gospel of the grace of God was revealed to him in its fullness.

So Sinai is the place where God defined his relationship with the Israelites. But Paul is realizing that because of Jesus Christ, that entire relationship between God and his people has now been redefined.

It's been completely redefined. No longer is it based on keeping the law. No longer is it based on circumcision. No longer is it based on being Jewish. That God has now completely redefined his relationship with his people.

[ 22 : 53 ] So now all people, regardless of ethnicity, regardless of race, regardless of background, regardless of their former religion, can come and, through their faith in Jesus Christ, receive grace and be baptized and become part of this great worldwide family.

And so Paul realizes here, at the foot of Mount Sinai, he realizes that all that Sinai represents has been fulfilled. It's all been fulfilled.

And he realizes that he has to completely abandon his old identity. He has to completely abandon his old way of life, his old agenda. And now all that matters is that he follows Jesus Christ, whatever that means.

No wonder he came out full of fire, ready to preach the good news, because he realized the implications of this were massive. This is going to change the world.

And it is changing the world. Now, even though this is partly about Paul and his legitimacy as an apostle, there is also something here for all of us.

[ 23 : 59 ] Paul comes face-to-face with Jesus. He comes face-to-face with the truth of the gospel, and then he spends three years rethinking everything about his identity and his life.

And only then does he fully come to understand the gospel of grace. And so if we pivot and we think about what this has to say to us, if we truly desire to be changed through the power of the gospel, and I do, every time I lose my temper, angry at my kids, every time it becomes obvious with my wife that I'm being incredibly selfish, time and time again when I look and I realize the kind of ugliness of my own heart, over and over and over again, I think and I pray and I long that the gospel would change me.

I don't want to be this person. My refrain is, I don't want to be that person anymore. I want to be somebody new, with a new heart. I want to have new inclinations, new desires, new tendencies, new knee-jerk reactions.

I don't want to feel the feelings that I feel toward people who disagree with me or dislike me. I want to feel love for those people. I want a new heart. Right?

So if we desire the gospel to change us, to change our hearts, we have to be willing to do what Paul did. In other words, we have to go to the very foundation of our old identity, whatever that is.

[ 25 : 25 ] For you, it's probably not Sinai, but it's probably something. We have to go to the very roots of our identity. What have we built that identity on? Is it our race? Is it our ethnicity? Is it something else? Is it our family?

Is it our job? Is it our vision of a flourishing, successful life? Whatever that is, our credentials, right? Our education, whatever it is, you have to go to the very foundation of that.

Sit at the foot of that mountain. And then allow the gospel to completely call everything into question. Allow it to begin to rebuild you from the ground up so that you begin to become a new person.

And this happens through contemplation. It happens through, as Paul is doing, the study of scripture, reflecting on the truth of what we know about Jesus, reflecting on our own conversion, and asking very deep, hard, penetrating questions of ourselves.

Right? Questions like this. Do I believe the true gospel, or have I bought into some version of the gospel? That's a counterfeit. Am I really thinking in therapeutic terms?

[ 26 : 26 ] Or do I really understand what the true gospel says? And how do we know if we're out of balance? Well, we have to continually come back to scripture. It's one of the things we try to do every Sunday here, is to recenter ourselves and reclarify what do we mean when we say gospel.

What is our faith based on? So, do I believe the true gospel? What are my motivations? You know, you ask your heart, why am I really motivated to do the things that I do? Am I motivated by guilt? Am I motivated by shame?

Am I motivated by a desire to win somebody's approval? Or am I motivated purely by the love of my heavenly father? What motivates me? And how does my understanding of the gospel line up with that?

If the gospel is true, is that what should motivate me? Right? Are we still desiring to prove ourselves to other people? Or have we become servants of Christ?

Right? Right? Here's another one that I ask from time to time. What do you think God feels when you come into his mind? Right? If God's there and all of a sudden sort of his thoughts turn to you, what do you think God feels when you come into his mind?

[ 27 : 39 ] You know, most people would say disappointment. He should be doing more. You know, she should get her act together. You know, and does that line up with what we believe about the gospel?

Because if the gospel is true, then the answer to that question is delight. That when you come into God's mind, he feels delight.

Now, I don't know if you believe that. But that's fundamental to believe in the gospel. Right? When it comes to divisive issues, and Lord knows we have enough of those.

You know, we were talking about racism earlier. Another big divisive issue has been the Kavanaugh hearing. Right? And I know there's lots of strong opinions about that. But when it comes to issues like this, which response is your heart more likely to have?

What is your heart tendency? Are you more prone in your heart, when these issues come up, to condemnation or contrition? What's your knee-jerk reaction?

[ 28 : 44 ] Right? When issues like this come up, are you more prone to haughtiness? Or to humility? And then how do those knee-jerk responses line up with the gospel?

See, these are the ways that we need to preach the gospel to ourselves. Preach the gospel to our hearts. Right? If you're prone to be haughty, and you're prone to say, you know, well, if I had been, I can't believe they screwed that up so much.

If I had been making the decisions, it would have gone completely differently. You know, whatever the case may be, you have to preach the gospel to yourself. You have to preach the truth of Jesus Christ to yourself.

I say all this because I believe that God has put Christians in the world for just such a time as this. You look at a divided world. You look at society falling apart.

You look at a, you know, social fabric being torn to pieces. This is why God has established the church. It's not, it's not just for the good times. It's not just when everything's going well, and the economy's booming, and everybody's united, right?

[ 29 : 44 ] Rarely has that happened. And believe me, if you look at history, there have been times far worse than this. This is nothing. But God has instituted his church for just such a time as this, right?

When there is a tremendous need for healing, socially and spiritually, in our nation, in our world. This is why we're here. The church is God's plan A, is the, is the ongoing presence and ministry of Jesus Christ.

And there is no plan B. But in order for us to be a part of the solution in the world, in order for us to be ministers of reconciliation, as God's word called us, it has to begin with us, right?

It has to begin with our own hearts. We have to be aware of the false gospels in our midst, and the curses that they bring. We have to continually recenter ourselves on the person and the work of Jesus Christ.

We have to, as often as we can, confess our sin and seek God's mercy. We have to get our own house in order. Right? As James K.A. Smith says in his book, *Awaiting the King*, he says, the church is the body politic of the city of God.

[ 30 : 57 ] In other words, the church is the foretaste of new creation. It's a preview of the world as it will one day be when God's work is completed. And what that means is this, is that the church is the first place, it's the first institution, where things like racism and poverty and injustice should be completely eradicated.

Because the church is a preview of the world as it will one day be when Jesus has once and for all eradicated these evils from the world and wiped away every tear and has established his throne forever and ever.

Let's pray.