

Galatians: The One True Gospel

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Date: 30 September 2018

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[0 : 00] Well, I'm excited to be back. We had a wonderful retreat last weekend and excited to be here tonight because we're starting a new series that's going to take us through the fall.

And the series is going to be in a book that I actually can't believe we have not done in depth up until now. It's Paul's Letter to the Galatians. It's a wonderful book in the New Testament, very rich, a lot going on there.

And I want to just take a minute and explain why we would do this book right now. One of the things that we talk about at Church of the Advent, if you're newer to our community, really the core of our DNA is we talk about being a church that builds gospel-centered communities, that we want to build communities centered on the gospel.

So we want to build families up so that they are centered on the gospel. We want to build up intentional communities that are centered on the gospel, small groups that are centered on the gospel.

We want to build up other churches that are centered on the gospel and plant churches elsewhere that do the same. So this is the core of our identity, the core of our mission. And yet I realize that when we talk about things being gospel-centered, you know, that has kind of a buzzword feel to it.

[1 : 13] It's easy to hear that and to go right by it and not really know what we mean by the term. And so I thought we would take some time to look at Galatians because this is the clearest place I know to give us a vision for what it means to be a gospel-centered community.

Paul's letter to the Galatians. He's writing this letter to people in southern Turkey, mostly Gentiles. And he's writing it sometime between the late 40s and the early 50s A.D.

There's a little debate over exactly what year it was written. But his goal in writing this letter is to clarify what is the true gospel as opposed to false gospels, distortions of the gospel.

What is the true gospel and how do you recognize it? That's really the point of the letter. Now someone may say, well, you know, we live in a pluralistic society and who is he to say what the true gospel is and why does there need to be one true gospel?

Can't we have different versions of the gospel depending on people's preferences? And Paul would say, and I think that we will see this over the course of our time together this fall, that the way we define the gospel, the way we understand the gospel determines and shapes not only the course of our lives, how we think and feel and act, but the course of our community life.

[2 : 42] It drastically shapes the shape that our relationships take, how we handle conflict, how we handle failure, how we face fear, the things that we prioritize.

All of that is shaped by how we define the gospel. It all begins there. So it's worth spending time on. And so today we're going to be looking just at chapter 1 verses 1 through 9, a kind of introduction to what Paul is trying to say.

And this passage raises three questions for us to consider. What is the gospel? Why does the gospel get distorted? And then what's the big deal?

What's the gospel? Why does it get distorted? And what's the big deal? Let's pray together. Our Father, we thank you and we pray to you now because we know we're dealing with something that is not a product of human wisdom.

This is not simply the sage advice from wise women and men. This is something that has been delivered from you through your apostles across generations into our hands.

[3 : 53] And we know that because you reveal that only you can unveil it and enable us to fully understand it. So we pray that your spirit would enable us to do that very thing. In your son's name, amen.

So what is the gospel? What is the gospel? I'm going to paraphrase N.T. Wright, who's a New Testament scholar, in his commentary on Galatians to begin to paint a picture to help us understand Paul's message to the Galatians.

Imagine that you are in South Africa in the 1970s. What's going on? Not rhetorical. Not rhetorical. Yes. Apartheid. It's the height of apartheid.

And the society is very divided. And imagine that you come into that society at that point in time, the height of division and strife and tension. And imagine you come in and you have a vision.

You want to build a community center in the middle of town. And you have a vision that this community center will be a place where all people can come and gather, regardless of race, ethnicity, background, socioeconomic class, level of education, does not matter.

[5 : 01] This is a place, this one building where everybody can come. And you say your vision is that there's just going to be one door. And that there's just going to be one meeting space. And everybody will come and have a place at the table.

And so you come into this community and you clear the land and you begin to lay the foundation for this building. And you lay the foundation for the one room. And you lay the foundation for the one door. And just as you're finishing up laying the foundation, you're called away on urgent business. And so other people, while you're away, they come in to continue building where you left off. Now imagine a little time passes and you get a letter in the mail and you open the letter and you read it and it's from some people who are concerned.

And they say, these other builders that have come in, they're changing the design of the building. These builders are making some revisions to the blueprint.

They've decided that no, in fact, we need two meeting rooms. No, in fact, we need two doors. And so you investigate it and you wonder, what's the reaction in the community?

[6 : 06] And you realize that while some people are concerned and objecting, there are a lot of people who are relieved because it might have upheaval on our hands, might destabilize society if we do something like this, right?

And there are some people who ask these builders, why was the original design flawed? Why couldn't we just stick with the original plan? And these new builders would say, well, you know, you know, that guy, he has some really nice ideas and he means well.

He's very idealistic. But he's not even licensed. He's not even an architect. He's never built anything before. He doesn't really know what he's doing. Trust us.

We're the authorities on the matter. We know what's going to be best for this community. We think we should have two doors, one for black people, one for white people, two rooms. That's going to be better for everybody, right? Now, this situation is very similar to what Paul found himself dealing with in south-central Turkey.

Paul is entering into a community that is majorly divided. You have people there who are worshiping all different manner of local gods and goddesses.

[7 : 15] And by the way, a lot of those deities were racially specific. So you would worship a deity based on your race. That was the god that you would go to, but this other person might go to a different god or goddess, right?

And then you had this whole interesting group, this cult of worship that had risen up around the Roman emperor. You know, people who literally worshiped and deified politics, right?

Doesn't sound familiar at all. And then you had this subgroup of Jews who had their own synagogue in the area. And so you had all of these disparate groups who were very divided religiously.

They were divided racially. They were divided socioeconomically. There are free citizens, but there are also foreigners who do not have citizenship in Rome, and there are slaves. All different kinds of people.

And so when Paul first enters this area, he begins to lay a foundation through his teaching. He begins to lay a foundation for this divided society by telling them the good news of the gospel.

[8 : 16] And here's the radical message that he begins to lay out to this disparate community. He says, first of all, there's only one god. There's not many gods and goddesses, depending on who you are and where you're from.

There's only one god. He's not landlocked. He's not locked into a certain race. He's not locked into a certain people group. One god who made all of this. One god who made all of you. And then he goes on to say, and this god has revealed himself ultimately in a Jew named Jesus.

And through him, God has made his plan that he's had for all time. He's finally revealed that plan and allowed us to see what he has been planning for so long.

Because this Jesus is the Messiah. Now by Messiah, he means a king to end all kings. Right? A king above all kings.

This Jesus is the Lord. The Lord of everything. Which obviously means that Caesar is not Lord of everything.

[9 : 23] And the Romans did not miss the implications of this. Right? A rival king. A rival lord. And so the Romans did to Jesus what they did to anyone who postured as a king.

As a rival authority. They executed him. And Paul would say, aha. But that's where the good news starts. Because then God saw fit to raise this Jesus from the grave.

And through that resurrection, God's true plan was revealed. Through that resurrection, God began to call into existence one great family.

From all the nations of the earth. And it became clear that God's desire all along had been to not just be the God of Israel.

But his plan all along had been to be the father of the whole world. That all people, regardless of their background, would have one father and be part of one family.

[10 : 26] And as Paul begins to lay this out, it becomes clear that this is not just a new belief system. Or a new life philosophy to live by. Or a new way to get saved.

The gospel is the announcement that Jesus, who is the crucified and risen Messiah, is Lord of the whole world. And because he's Lord of the whole world, he's calling into existence one single worldwide family.

So you understand, this is massive. Right? This hits like a bomb in the middle of the society. This is society overturning stuff. Right?

This causes major upheaval. Because people begin to suss out the implications for themselves.

Well, if this is true, it means that we no longer have to seek God. Or make sacrifices to God.

Or constantly wonder, is God there? Does he hear me? Does he love me? Will he answer my prayer? Because God has in fact come to us. We no longer have to seek him out.

[11 : 26] They begin to realize. And they begin to look at Caesar. And they begin to look at the authorities. And they begin to say, if this is true, it means that no longer should we ever worship human authority.

No longer should a human ruler ever be given absolute allegiance. Right? This begins to say, everybody back in these days, everybody assumed that your emperor or your ruler or your king, that they had divine blessing.

And more than that, they were divine. They were divine. And so you had to give them absolute obedience. This is saying, no, they are not divine. They're just human.

And they have an authority in heaven. This lays the groundwork for what Martin Luther King terms civil disobedience. Right? The prerogative, because we submit to a higher authority, to disobey.

To disobey when necessary in order to be faithful to our true king. So this is world-changing stuff.

Right? No longer will there be any reason to devalue people because of their race or their ethnicity or their gender or their socioeconomic class.

[12 : 32] Because all are imbued with equal worth and dignity through the gospel. Right? No long will there be an us and them. Because this tells us that every human being, even my most hated enemy, even the most hated enemy of my family and my tribe, is actually my brother.

It's actually my sister. We have the same father. Right? So you begin to see how this would radically alter everything. The gospel changes everything. But most people don't like change.

Most people don't like change. It's human nature. You know, change is terrifying. It's destabilizing.

So after Paul laid this foundation and then he was called away, other builders came in and they began to alter what Paul had started to build in his preaching of the gospel.

They began to say very similar things as the example earlier. Well, you know, this Paul guy, he's a nice guy. He means well. He uses big words. You know, he's kind of a short and he's not really very attractive and he's kind of a mediocre preacher.

But he has some nice things to say. But then they would kind of pull you aside and say, but he's not even really an apostle. He's never really been taught by Jesus. You know, these other apostles, they followed Jesus.

[13 : 55] They were the disciples. Paul's not really an apostle. I know he kind of sounds convincing and smart and these are nice ideas, but let's be realistic. And they would say, you know, everybody knows that Jews and Gentiles are just different.

They're just fundamentally different. You know, separate but equal. Everybody knows that we can't just have chaos, everybody coming in the same door, meeting in the same room.

It's going to be better for everybody if we have two separate doors. You know, and if the Gentiles really want the kind of insider relationship that the Jews have had for centuries with God, doesn't it make sense that they should get circumcised as well?

That they should come under the law of Moses as well? See, that's just going to be better for everybody. And this is what was happening and Paul gets wind of this. And so the gospel is starting to be distorted.

And so this brings us to the second question. Why does the gospel get distorted? What's behind this? It's more than just a fear of change. Why does the gospel get distorted? If the gospel is this, Jesus is Lord and through his death and resurrection he is calling into existence one great worldwide family, completely reconciled to God through the sacrifice of the cross and being reconciled to one another through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

[15 : 13] That's the gospel. Why does it get distorted? That's an amazing message. Galatians 1.6 says, I'm astonished. This is Paul. I'm astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.

Not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. Why would anyone want to distort such a great message? You've got to understand something about Jewish history.

Right? Way back long ago, the Jews had been chosen by God. God had said, I'm going to set you apart. I'm going to make you my people. You know, God had made a promise to their forefather Abraham that they were going to be special in his economy.

That he was going to bless them. That he was going to provide for them. That he was going to give them land and descendants as numerous as the stars. And then God had said, through you, I'm going to bless all the nations of the earth.

Right? But over time, what had happened? Well, the Jews had started out realizing that they had been chosen by God and therefore they were special. But it started to get reversed.

[16 : 25] First, if God chose us, we must be inherently special. There must be something inherently superior. That's the only way we could explain it.

So you begin to forget that God choosing them, God bestowing that blessing on them was purely an act of grace. They didn't deserve it. They didn't earn it. They weren't influential. They weren't movers and shakers in the ancient Near Eastern world.

They were really nobodies. In some ways, that's why God chose them. If there's a reason that we could ever discern. They didn't earn it. It was an act of grace. And they had been given this symbol of that grace.

Circumcision. Let this symbol remind you that I intervened in your life and I chose you. And I bestowed my grace upon you when you didn't deserve it, didn't earn it, could never repay it. I've done this because I'm the Lord.

Right? That's what circumcision was meant to mean. You're set apart because of my grace. But that symbol began to change. That symbol began to morph. It began to get distorted in their minds.

[17 : 28] And all of a sudden, they began to think, I'm not special because God chose me. God chose me because I'm special. And they began to take this symbol of grace, circumcision, and they began to turn it into a symbol of merit.

Right? This is a symbol of my inherent superiority. Not grace. Merit. And what we need to understand is that every distortion of the gospel, every distortion of the gospel involves twisting grace into merit.

It involves us refusing to purely accept a gift and instead somehow redefining the terms so that they're based on our own performance and our own excellence.

It's human nature. And we say, well, how could the Jews do this? And don't they know better? And blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Well, you have to understand from their perspective what was going on. If you were a Jew at this point in time, what was your biggest political concern?

That was the Roman occupation. Right? The Roman occupiers. And when is God going to liberate us? And can you imagine growing up in this society and your grandmother and grandfather and your mom and your dad and your aunts and your uncles, you would sit around the fire at night and what would you do?

[18 : 42] They would recount all the old great stories. Right? All the times that God delivered His people. God, we were slaves in Egypt and God delivered us.

We were exiles in Babylon and God delivered us. And where would that eventually lead? One day God is going to deliver us again. Right? But at that time, even though you had that hope, you were powerless in society.

You had no influence. The Romans oppressed you. They owned you. They called all the shots. You had no hope. There had been attempted rebellions and uprisings. They had always been shut down, sometimes with a lot of bloodshed.

So what are you supposed to do? Well, the only thing you could console yourself with is this. At the end of the day, I know that God is on my side. One day, God's going to show all those Romans. He's going to show all those people. He's going to vindicate us. That would be your greatest comfort. And how do I know? Because of my circumcision. Because of this symbol.

[19 : 40] God's on my side. Right? So you can imagine these Jews start to become Christians. The Messiah has come. They're excited. Maybe this is the time that the uprising and the freedom will begin for our people.

God's going to throw off the oppressors. And you start going to church and you start learning about Jesus and learning about the gospel. And you're baptized. And your whole family is baptized. And you begin to worship together at this little house church down the road from where you live.

And one day, you're gathering for church and you're chasing your kids down as they run up and down the aisles. Then all of a sudden, the door is darkened. And you look up and you see a face that has never entered that church before.

But you know darn well who it is. He's not a Jew. You know even without the uniform on, this is a Roman centurion and his family.

The very embodiment of Roman authority. The very embodiment of oppression. The very embodiment of privilege. And he comes in the door with his family and he sits down right next to you.

[20 : 39] And then this crazy, short, ugly, mediocre preacher named Paul gets up. And he has the audacity to tell you that because of Jesus, there is no longer any difference between this man and you.

How dare you? That you are all equal in God's eyes. That you're brothers and sisters and you share in the inheritance of Jesus Christ. Your inheritance.

The inheritance that had been promised to the Jews for centuries. How dare he say that? Can you understand what that must have been like? But I'm the one with the circumcision. You haven't even been under the law of Moses.

You haven't even gone through what I've gone through. You have no idea what it's like to be me to go through all of those years of oppression. You have no idea. How dare you just waltz in here and assume that you could sit down next to me and share the same meal.

I won't have it. This is what's happening. And in a very understandable way that we can empathize, a symbol of grace has become a symbol of merit.

[21 : 39] Right? And they say, no, we won't have it. Every distortion of the gospel involves twisting grace into merit. Forgetting that our relationship with God is based on a gift and beginning to think that we have somehow earned it.

We've suffered enough for it. We've obeyed enough for it. And what we began to see as we peel back the onion of the human heart is that human beings are irrepressibly self-righteous.

In other words, we have this irrepressible desire to prove our own worth and excellence. And the better you are, the more good you do in the world, the harder it is to repress that.

Right? We need to prove ourselves. And the best way to do that is what? Well, to compare yourselves to other people. Right? Well, how do I know I'm good and worthy and valuable in God's kingdom? Well, I know I'm better than you.

Now, we would never say that, but we think it. You know, I mean, surely in the grand scheme of things, when all of this is totaled up and, you know, I'm going to be one of the good guys. I have yet

to meet anybody who's lucid, who doesn't think they're a good guy.

[22 : 48] Everybody thinks they're the good guy. Everybody thinks they're the protagonist. Right? But if we begin to look at our society, we begin to realize that we see this self-righteousness sort of percolating to the surface.

Let me just give you one example. Over the last couple of hundred years, everybody will agree that there's been a decline of Christianity in the West.

Right? Christianity has retreated. And we have numbers coming out over the last couple of decades of people leaving the church in droves. Churches are sinking and some denominations are dying. So, you know, the society has become more and more and more secular, less and less and less defined by a Christian worldview.

And this is, you know, measurable phenomenon. We can see this very clearly. What I'm interested in is the impact that that is having on our society because most people, when they think about legalism, when they think about moralism, when they think about sort of people being judgmental toward one another, they immediately think of Christians.

I hate those Christians who are so judgmental and legalistic and have all their rules and they're always condemning people. I hate those Christians. And so you would think that as Christianity retreats in the West and as we are sort of no longer burdened by a Judeo-Christian moral framework that we would become more gracious, more open-minded, more sort of laissez-faire, that there would be a removal of the legalism and it would just sort of be, you know, everybody kind of, you know, do whatever you want.

[24 : 20] And, you know, for a while we talked about our society being very relativistic and that was sort of in the early, you know, early days when the retreat had just begun.

Things have changed. It's not like that anymore. In fact, I would say I think that you can make a very convincing argument that we have become more legalistic and more moralistic and more judgmental than ever in any time I remember.

I'm 41 and I've just seen this progression over the course of my adult life of our society becoming more and more and more rigidly moralistic and legalistic. It's been amazing to watch.

You know, it's interesting if you begin to compare the church and life in the church with what we see in secular society. Again, just to give you one example, take the idea of excommunication. All right, so most people, the idea of excommunication is a horrible thing.

You know, the Bible tells us that in a church community, if somebody continues in sin and they continually refuse to repent and we've done everything we can to pursue that brother or sister and they just refuse, that at some point we are called to cast them out.

[25 : 25] Paul talks about this in 1 Corinthians 5. We are to cast them out. And people say, well, that's horrible. How could you do that? And that's so mean and judgmental. But what's interesting is, is the entire purpose of excommunication in the church is restoration and unity in the body, right?

Because in 2 Corinthians, Paul revisits the same situation and he says, now that you've cast this brother out, I'm concerned that he might be overwhelmed with excessive sorrow. And so now I want you to go and I want you to reaffirm your love for him.

Why? Because ultimately the goal is that that brother would be folded back into the arms of the community and they would, as one, continue in their progression toward the eschaton, towards God's ultimate purpose, establishing them as a family to glorify his name, right?

That's the reason that they do it. It's a way of saying to everybody, we take sin seriously because we take holiness seriously. Now contrast that with the excommunications that we see play out every single day, the public excommunications that occur.

Almost every single day, somebody says something in the wrong way, they send out a stupid tweet that they didn't think about, they do something that it didn't mean to do, and they're found out. And what happens?

[26 : 38] Many, many, many times, the judgment is swift and brutal, right? The public shaming begins. The public outrage begins.

And once that happens, there is no eye toward restoration. There is no eye toward future unity. There is no concern about anyone being overwhelmed with excessive sorrow.

People are brutally shamed and cast aside, and then we move on to the next target. And this is damaging to people. It ruins families.

It ruins lives. And so as we see this happen, and as we see it happen again and again and again, we realize legalism isn't something that comes out of Christianity, or really any religion. Legalism comes out of the human heart. Legalism is a product, is a fruit of the natural human heart. The retreat of Christianity has not created a more gracious and tolerant society.

[27 : 40] It's resulted in a more shame-based, moralistic society. And the point we need to see is this, that legalism is not the result of Christianity. It's the result of the absence of Christianity, right?

Because this is human nature. Christianity, therefore, is not the cause of legalism. Christianity, and the radical message of Paul is this, Christianity is the cure for legalism.

This is the cure. It's the only way out. Every other religious system, philosophy, every secular society, they default. We default into legalism. Us, them, insider, outsider.

We're desperate to be on the inside. We are desperate not to be the target of shame. So, what's the big deal? What's the big deal?

Why does it matter? Paul spells out the gospel in verse 3. He says this, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins.

[28 : 38] Who gave himself for our sins. All right, so the gospel begins with us owning and confessing our own personal sin. Our stake in the breakdown of the world.

And that's where things get so hard, because I'm happy to talk about social sin. I'm happy to talk about institutional sin.

I'm happy to talk about other people's sin. But I do not like talking about my own sin. But only then, Paul would say, only then can we accept the grace of Jesus Christ.

Only then does it become grace when we realize that we didn't do anything to earn this blessing and favor of God. That he has chosen to bestow it because of his grace.

But what that does is it fundamentally reorients your sense of self. Instead of being concerned about, am I inside or am I outside? Am I one of the good guys or one of the bad guys? And how do I stack up and rank up compared to this, that, or the other person around me?

[29 : 36] When our self-conception begins to be reoriented around the grace of God. And we began to see ourselves primarily as recipients of grace. Something we didn't earn and could never repay.

That begins to change everything. Because what the gospel tells us is that no one, no matter how morally or religiously devoted, no matter how well educated, can assume that they are entitled to God's blessing.

Because the gospel levels the playing field. How do you create one worldwide family from all the peoples of the earth when everybody is so different? First, you have to level the playing field.

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But to all is the invitation of grace. So why does this matter? Just to get very practical for a minute here at the end.

Because our society is being ripped apart. Because we're so deeply divided, we don't know what to do with ourselves. We're divided along religious lines. We're divided along racial lines.

[30 : 37] We're divided along political lines. We're divided along socioeconomic lines, educational lines. In every way you can imagine, we're being ripped apart. And as I said a little while ago, I feel like it's getting worse, not better.

You know, I just have to confess, you know, I've been rocked this week. As I'm sure most of you have as well. Between Cavanaugh and Ford and watching this whole thing unfold.

And some of you are a lot closer than I am. You know, I know people who have been... Somebody talked to me this morning and said, you know, I've been there for every minute of it. I've had to be in the room every minute of it. And it's brutal.

And I have to confess, I have no idea what to say about it. You know, my great fear is that if I say anything, that will be in some way interpreted as bias, right?

For, against, right? Because that's the lens that we're looking at it through. And so I've reached out and all my friends, pastor friends, men and women, I've said, what are you doing about this? And everybody's kind of ringing their, you know, I have no idea what to do.

[31 : 37] I have no idea what to say. It's awful, right? And so I thought, what's the only thing that I can say with any degree of confidence here? Recognizing the pain and the suffering that this has created for so many people.

You know, the hurt and past trauma that this has awakened for so many people. The only thing I can say with confidence is this. That Jesus Christ is the only one who can heal the spiritual and

social fabric of our society.

He is the only one. The only way to have a real relationship with God is through the gospel. The only way to have any hope of having real relationships with one another is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It's the only hope we have. But in order to become a part of that hope and to, God willing, become a part of the answer, it begins with our willingness to accept grace, which means admitting our own sin.

Which means recognizing that we don't deserve and yet we've been given this miraculous gift. And that we've been promised by God that as a result of that gift, we can look forward to the day when all injustice and division and strife will be no more.

[32 : 52] And that we will be there together to celebrate it. To the praise of his holy name. Let's pray. by the fruit of our eyes.