

# Return to the Gospel of Grace

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Preacher: James Ross

[ 0 : 00 ] There is in all of us, I think, an instinct to protect what is precious to us. And we can think about that in the context of family.

Parents want to protect their children. We want to protect our friendships or our reputation or our sense of independence. Whatever is important to us, we want to protect.

And what we see is that Paul wants to protect the precious gospel of grace in Jesus Christ. Imagine with me, just for a moment, that you were to take a trip to the Louvre in Paris to go and see some fine art.

And you walked up to the Mona Lisa, which is always surrounded by huge crowds. Lots of people are really impressed by it. But you decide that there's something missing.

She looks a little bit lonely. So out of your pocket, you take the crayons that you've taken with you and you decide to draw her a cat. So she can stroke to feel a little bit better about herself.

[ 1 : 06 ] Her life looks a little bit dull, you might think. Now, you might think that thing looks wonderful. I can tell you that the management would be devastated.

The art world would be angered because you have destroyed something that everybody else considered to be a priceless work of art. Now, that's the kind of mindset that I want us to think about when we think about what Paul is saying here at the beginning of his letter.

Paul gets this. We need to protect what's precious to us. He has discovered for himself the precious gospel of grace. Jesus has come and he's changed his life and everything is different.

Now, Paul's life is dominated by this message that though I was undeserving, Jesus came and rescued me. And this letter is a passionate defense of this gospel of grace.

So he writes the letter sometime around about 50 AD, so maybe 15, 20 years or so after the death and resurrection of Jesus. And he writes it to a group of churches in this region known as Galatia.

[ 2 : 16 ] Paul was a missionary and on his first missionary journey, we can read about it in Acts 13 and 14, he stopped off in this region and he established some new churches.

And these churches that had received the gospel of grace that they heard from Paul are now turning away from that. And so Paul writes this letter in defense of the gospel of grace that he brought to him.

So the letter, as we look at it over the next few months, is going to show us, it's going to show us what is the gospel of grace? Why is, on the one hand, rejecting it so dangerous for this church and for ourselves?

And why is receiving it and living in it so wonderful? So I want to begin with the diagnosis that Paul makes on this church.

Because like so many of the New Testament letters, it's written to a particular people at a particular time and place addressing a particular issue. So what is the issue that gets Paul's attention that makes him write this letter?

[ 3 : 23 ] Read with me in verse 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.

Paul is amazed and he is shocked because they are walking away from the God of grace. They have become, as it were, spiritual turncoats.

They have abandoned the message of God's grace for an alternative false gospel. Like spies in the Cold War who were turned by the Soviet Union to work against their nation for the Soviets.

So these Christians are being turned away from God and his grace. We see in this little section mentioned a number of times of the gospel.

So let's just stop and think, what is that word gospel saying to us? So for them it would be very familiar because if you lived in the Roman Empire at this time, you'd be used to hearing the

announcement of gospel messages, good news.

[ 4 : 34 ] So the emperor would have a son, a new heir to the throne, and this gospel message would go out through the empire. Or they would win a great victory over enemies.

And again, a gospel message would be announced. So the word gospel is all about good news. It's about something that has happened that is of life-changing importance.

For Paul, that good news is that God has sent his son to be our savior, that he has died on the cross to save us from sins. That's the good news that he is teaching.

And he's so distressed because this church is threatening to walk away from it and to exchange that teaching. Verse 7, Evidently, some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.

So we're going to meet through the letter this fact that there is another group of teachers, sometimes known as the Judaizers. And we're going to see that throughout the letter what the problem is, this message that they are bringing.

[ 5 : 42 ] We'll see some of the details. But here's the big overview. Here's the crucial question that Paul brings to us and to the church in Galatia. Is the work of Jesus complete?

Or must we add something to it in order to be accepted by God? There are presented in this letter two alternatives. There's the way of grace or there is the way of works.

And Paul is going to emphasize time and time again the way of grace. He's going to speak of the love of God to those who are undeserving, to those who are unable to save themselves.

He's going to highlight again and again that salvation rests entirely on the finished work of Jesus. We don't add anything to that. We receive it by faith.

But then there's this other group and there's this other philosophy. There's this way of works, which is saying, yes, trust in Jesus, absolutely. But there's also some stuff that you need to do if you want to be accepted by God.

[ 6 : 50 ] So in their context, trust in Jesus and keep certain Jewish rituals. Watch what you eat. Be circumcised. Those kind of things. That can play itself out in our day as messages like, yes, trust in Jesus, but that your quality of faith, your quantity of faith, your moral goodness, reaching some kind of standard to be acceptable to God matters.

So we can hear this message ourselves, not take on Jewish rituals, but there is a bar, there is some kind of level that you need to reach if God's going to welcome and accept you.

So what's the difference between these two ways of thinking, ways of salvation? The way of grace is thoroughly God-centered, where Jesus is the only Savior, whereas salvation by works is always going to be man-centered and performance-based because it's asking us to contribute.

Now at this stage, you might be thinking, but is this really such a big deal? I'm hearing that they're trusting in Jesus. Okay, they're adding some extra things, but is that such a big deal?

Well, let's go back to Mona Lisa. Let's go back to Mona and her new crayon cat. You know, by adding to that masterpiece, we haven't enhanced it.

[ 8 : 18 ] We have destroyed and devalued it. And it's the same when we add anything to the gospel. As soon as we say to someone, you need Jesus and anything, we lose the gospel, which is grace from beginning to end.

It's grace that saves and it's grace that sustains. We don't begin in grace and then move on to earn our way into God's kingdom. It's grace from beginning to end.

Somebody has helpfully put it like this. There is a gospel equation that says, Jesus plus nothing equals everything.

And we need to hold on to that. And we need to recognize that Paul is also showing us there is a false gospel equation. And he's going to say that if you have Jesus plus anything, you end up with nothing.

Verses eight to nine show us just how much holding on to this gospel of grace matters. Let's hear these words again. 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 : 38 ] To leave behind the gospel of grace. To present to the world a different gospel other than salvation by grace alone through faith in Jesus alone is to become anathema.

To be under the eternal judgment of God. In short, what we do with this gospel of grace is a life or death thing.

It's not a small thing. It's not something that we are free to trifle with or play around with. It's life or death. So while it might seem small to us at a surface level, trust Jesus, but also keep some Jewish food laws and add some circumcision, the effect is to rob God of his glory and to lose grace and the gospel.

And notice this isn't just deserting an idea or a theory. This is not a philosophy that we're batting around. Verse six, I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ.

Following a false gospel is to walk away from God himself. If we think that we have to add something, bring something to the table in order to be saved, then we are putting further distance between ourselves and the God who saves by grace.

[11:14] The God who calls people by grace. So that to reject that gospel of grace is to reject God and to reject Jesus, the son he sent to be our rescuer.

So I hope that we're seeing already just how crucial this is to our personal and our spiritual well-being. That if it is true that I am saved by grace and grace alone, then that means it's possible for me to have peace with God.

That it's possible for me to have a sense of security. That there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, even when we sin. Because we look to the cross and we realize Jesus has paid for all of our sin.

God won't demand from us what he's already demanded from his son, Jesus. There is the possibility of true joy and true hope through being united to the Lord Jesus Christ and trusting in what he's done for us on the cross.

But if our way of saving ourselves is about my works, there's going to be constant anxiety. Have I done enough? Have I reached God's standard?

[12:30] And if I reach it today but I mess up tomorrow, where does that leave me in God's eye? It's going to lead us to competition and comparison where we're not looking at Jesus and his perfect standard and recognizing that I need to be trusting in that alone because I'm a sinner.

We're going to be saying, well, I'm doing better than this person so I can feel proud. Or maybe I'm having a bad day and I see others doing well and so I feel a sense of despair. So it makes all the difference in the world how we hear and how we respond to the gospel of grace.

And so Paul very quickly moves to this diagnosis of the church, saying to him, you're walking away from the grace of God in Jesus. And it's something that we need to hear all the time to hang on to or to return to or to receive for the first time this gospel of grace.

Now, having said that, having heard Paul's diagnosis, and he's clearly said some very serious things, perhaps we're asking the question, well, what gives him the right to say that?

What are his credentials? So let's look at Paul's authority for a few minutes. What gives him the right to talk as he does? Or to put it another way, why should the church then listen to his message and not the message of the false teachers, as he calls them, of the Judaizers?

[13:47] What is it about his message that means that we should listen to his gospel of grace and not some other message or method for how we might save ourselves?

And Paul gets right to this as he introduces himself. So typical Roman letter would be a very brief opening, from person X to person Y, greetings.

But Paul has a very loaded introduction where he highlights his qualifications, his right to speak. It's as if a medical professional was sending you a letter saying, you need to come and receive this treatment, and they might head that letter with all their titles and qualifications.

Here's a word that you can trust. So what qualifies Paul to speak with the authority that he does? Just need to look at these opening words.

Verse 1, Paul, an apostle. So let's stop for a moment. What is an apostle? An apostle was literally a sent one.

[14:55] Somebody was sent with a special message, given a special status, and a mission from somebody with a higher authority. So Paul is an apostle, but the important thing is who sent him.

That's the real authority that matters. And so he continues, sent not from men, doesn't get his authority from a government, or from a council of the church perhaps, nor by man.

And he's going to make clear, it wasn't somebody like Peter, Peter the great pillar of the church, it wasn't Peter that sent me, gave me authority. He is an apostle by the authority of Jesus Christ, and God the Father.

He speaks for Jesus. He is sent by Jesus. Paul comes to this church, writing this letter as Jesus' agent of grace. He's not saying, listen to me, I'm an apostle to show off.

He's not just throwing his weight around, he is inviting them to listen to his words of authority, to hear them as the very words of Jesus to them.

[16:05] In effect, he's going to say to them, if you choose to argue with me, you're arguing with Jesus. It's a serious thing. As an apostle then, his teaching is the standard for what is a true, or what is a false, gospel message.

And he makes that clear right from the start of his letter. Now we need to stop for a moment and think, why does this matter for us today? I think it's really relevant. You know, we live in a postmodern culture.

If you've read anything about how many people are taught to approach a text, oftentimes the key question is, is not what is the author saying, but what is this text, what does this idea mean to me? The idea is that truth is what we make it to be. And against that, you know, this is my truth, tell me yours culture, Paul reminds us that the Bible, as God's word, stands with authority.

That Paul and others are those who are given authority by God to announce his word to us, to bring the word of God, that what we have here is the very word of God.

[17:17] As Tim Keller puts it, the Bible judges the church. The church does not judge the gospel. The church is not free to stand over the word of God and say, I don't like that, but I think if we move this bit over here, then this message will play better with a modern audience.

It speaks to how we read the Bible, that we don't read looking for what suits our personal taste.

We're not reading based on our personal interpretation.

We want to hear, for example, Galatians and hear, what is Jesus saying through the apostle Paul to them and to the church and to me as an individual?

We need to hold on to the truth as it's been passed down. And Paul recognizes that holding on to the word of God is crucial to holding on to the gospel of grace.

And that has then important implications for us. We need in the first instance to be willing to accept the authority of the word of God and submit to its truth.

[18:24] Even if we find that difficult, even when it challenges our ideas, our values perhaps. We need secondly, to be able to heed its warnings.

So we've got a very clear, a very direct warning from Paul to the church in Galatia. They need to hear it else they will make shipwreck of their faith. Now, nobody likes to hear warnings.

Our kids don't jump up and down for joy when we tell them, don't do this, it's not good for you. But warnings keep us safe. And so when we read the Bible, we need to hear and respond to those warnings.

And fundamentally, we need to hold tight to the central message of the Bible, to that great announcement of good news, to remember that central message of Jesus and his cross, the message of salvation available to us as Jesus becomes our substitute to die in our place for our sins, to gift us eternal life, to bring us into the love of God.

So that's Paul's authority. We've got one last section to look at. And it's a truly amazing part of the introduction. So Paul has said, okay, I'm an apostle of Jesus and with authority.

[19:44] And as such, he says, I'm amazed that some of you are accepting a false message that will lead to your spiritual death. There's a point of tension here.

So are they done for as a church, as a people? Are they now without hope because they've begun to move away?

And the answer is absolutely no. Look at how he speaks to them in verse three to five. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is peace and grace for you now. There is good news for you now. And what Jesus has done for you on the cross and what the Father has planned in the sending of his son Jesus, go back to that.

Return to the gospel of grace. Go back to Jesus. Here's the wonderful hope of the gospel. Here is hope for us.

[20:51] If we're here today and we feel like we're spiritual prodigals, prodigals as it were, that we've wandered far away from God. Or here is hope for us if we've simply had one of those weeks where we've made bad decisions and we've treated others in ways that we feel ashamed of and disappointed with ourselves.

There is hope in the gospel because what Paul doesn't say to them is shame on you. And he doesn't say, do better, try harder.

He extends the life-giving gospel of grace to them once again. He says to them, trust in that message to bring you peace with God.

It's as if Paul sees them lost at sea and here he is throwing the life belt to them. Come back to the safety of shore by returning to the gospel of grace.

So what is the gospel as he brings it to them here? It's a precious gift. It's a free gift. First of all, from the Lord Jesus Christ. What has the Lord Jesus Christ done for his people?

[ 22 : 02 ] Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age.

He gave himself for our sins. So here's the language of Jesus becoming our substitute, giving himself to stand in our place, obedient where we are disobedient, taking the punishment that we deserve.

Here is the language of sacrifice. Here is Jesus' death paying for our sins so that there is no condemnation when we're trusting in him.

Here is the language of rescue. One of the things about the gospel is that it kind of humbles us in the way that it's presented.

It doesn't... It makes us go low. He's saying it's like we're hostages needing to be set free. We're slaves and we cannot earn our own freedom.

[ 23 : 02 ] We need a rescuer and Jesus has come to be that rescuer, to rescue us, we're told, from the present evil age. In the Bible, we've got two ages that get spoken of.

There's the present evil age and there's the age to come. And what Paul is saying is that through faith in Jesus, God's people will not face destruction at the end of the present evil age.

When Jesus comes back as judge and to make all things new, for those who are trusting in Jesus, they won't face destruction. And in the present, he's saying, you are no longer controlled by the power of sin.

You have been set free now. Sin is no longer your master. Jesus is. Now that you belong to the new age of salvation, now that you belong in the kingdom of God.

And this comes to us not because we've earned it, but as a free gift of God's grace. And it's also, this gospel of grace is a precious gift from God our Father.

[ 24 : 07 ] So what does the Father do? Well, having said that Jesus gave himself for our sins to rescue us, we're told that that was according to the will of our God and Father.

God wills, God plans the salvation of his people. This wonderful message of rescue is tied to God's eternal plan to save sinners by grace through sending his own son as the rescuer.

That was always the plan. Even before the world was created, even before there was sin, God had this eternal plan to send Jesus to be the saviour of the world.

And this is the gospel that brings grace and peace now to them, to us. If we will turn to Jesus, if we will turn back to him, if we'll be humble enough to see that we can't save ourselves, that we need the rescuer.

Here is a gospel that highlights, celebrates God's love and grace with the result in verse 5 that Paul breaks out in praise to whom be glory forever and ever.

[ 25 : 22 ] It's God who gets the glory for his grace in the gospel. Martin Luther, the great reformer, said it well, if you do not build your confidence on the work of Christ, you must build your confidence on your own work.

And here is what Paul is bringing to this church and bringing to us. We need to decide who is it that we are going to depend on. Will it be Jesus Christ alone or will we pin our hope on our own ability to save ourselves?

And just as he pleads, offers a plea to the church in Galatia, so we need to hear that plea for ourselves. Turn and receive this gospel of grace.

Continue to believe the gospel of grace. live in it. Rejoice in it, knowing it's grace from beginning to end.