

Drifting from the Gospel

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 April 2023

Preacher: Duncan Murchison

[0 : 00] Well, if you have a Bible in front of you, please do turn back to Galatians chapter 1. And this evening, I want us to think about from verse 6, I am 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.

And so on, we'll be thinking about that paragraph, verses 6 through 10. Galatians is a wonderful book, in my humble opinion.

It's a book that brings us back time and time again to the gospel, to the good news, to what Christ has done for us, and the importance of maintaining that in churches, in our own hearts, and not getting distracted, not getting sidetracked, not getting caught up in our own works, the things that we do to make us feel like we are good people.

It tells us time and time again that we are free because God has set us free, because Christ has died for us, and that the price for our sin has been paid by Christ.

That is the message that keeps coming through. And the reason that Paul is writing it is because, well, these churches in Galatia have kind of slipped away from that gospel.

[1 : 33] They've forgotten it. They've listened to false teachers. They've gone in a wrong direction. And in the paragraph we read, it's very clear there, isn't it?

It's very direct, you could say, language that is very clear that Paul isn't happy with these people. And it's not because they're Galatians or whatever else.

It's because the gospel is the thing that is so important that if it is lost, then everything is lost. Then churches become social clubs or whatever else.

And so what we're thinking about tonight is drifting from the gospel. And the way I think about this, apologies if you've got a flight soon, because you probably won't want to hear this. I don't know if you ever watched that air crash investigation or something like that.

Don't watch it before you have a flight. But one of the things I've learned from it is that if you're flying an airplane through a cloud, your brain can get tricked. If you're a pilot, your brain can get tricked into thinking that you're flying level when you're not.

[2 : 43] I think it's the same at night as well. The plane can be spinning out of control, pretty much upside down, heading down towards the ground, and the pilot won't even notice a thing.

Because their brain is tricking them, because of all the cloud, because there's no horizon, that they are flying straight and level when, unfortunately, they're not.

And the brain doesn't catch up until it's too late. And that may sound terrifying. It may put you off flying any time soon. But fortunately, there's a small gauge that can tell you exactly how level you are.

It's some sort of gyroscopic thing, and it's kind of an artificial horizon that will tell you if your wings are straight and if you're actually flying as you should be. And so the simple solution is keep your eye on the gauge, and you'll keep flying level.

You won't crash, and you won't burn. That is the simple solution. And hopefully you're beginning to see what this has to do with drifting from the gospel, with keeping to the good news, the good news about Jesus and his death on the cross for our sins.

[3 : 57] Because what is clear from what we read is this was being diluted, forgotten about, even possibly removed. Or as Paul is essentially saying in this passage, that's being turned upside down, distorted.

People are being troubled by it. A little bit like an out-of-control plane. This church in Galatia has taken its eye off the ball, off the horizon, and is in a tailspin.

It's out of control. And the thing is, a bit like that pilot, it can be very hard for us to notice. But Paul can see it.

So as he gets into the body of his letters, as he writes to these Galatians, he doesn't hold back. And he gets straight to the point. This is just the beginning.

And he's saying, you've got it wrong. You've gone adrift. You need to come back to the gospel itself. And that is what we ought to be about. And what I believe we are about here.

[5 : 00] It's the gospel. And without that, we do cease to be a church, simply moralistic people otherwise. And so as Paul writes, he is making very clear, there is absolutely nothing more important than to be keeping our eye on this gospel.

That is what will keep us level. That is what will keep us safe. That is what will keep us bringing glory to God. If we're living in powers, not by our own strength, not by anything else, but Christ himself, but by the gospel.

So I want us to think of very briefly tonight this passage under three headings. First of all, astonished. Second of all, accursed. And third of all, approval. Astonished, accursed, approval. So first of all, astonished. And perhaps it's not a word we'd use every day. I don't think I say it very much. But it's that sense of disbelief, isn't it?

Marvelling. How can this happen? How can it be? Sometimes it's a positive thing. Something that's astonishingly good. But I think it's obvious Paul's not saying something positive here.

[6 : 08] He is astonished. More in the sense of seeing something that shouldn't happen. Something that is unexpected. Something that is surprising. If you were to see a police car pull up at your door, you might be astonished.

And wonder, why are the police coming to my door? Have I done something wrong? Maybe you're like me and you're just driving along normally. And you think, have I done something wrong? When you see the blue lights behind you, no, you've not. But you're astonished. And there's so many things that can do this. You know, I know someone, how when they're, when they're, when they always go on about how broke they are.

And then they buy a brand new computer or they buy a video game console. And you're, how you're astonished. Not in a good way. It's unexpected. It's not what it should be. It's, it's one of these things.

And Paul can't quite believe what he sees and what he's heard from other people. They're so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.

[7 : 12] They are deserting him so quickly and deserting him. It's a word that comes from a military context, isn't it? You know, turncoats, traitors, going to the other side, abandoning their allegiance, abandoning their brothers in arms, abandoning their king and going to the other side.

And that's the kind of thing that Paul is talking about. It's astonishing that they are abandoning their savior, their king and going to the other side. And if he was just talking about the concept of the gospel in the abstract, then it would seem a very dry, I suppose, or ideological kind of thing. But what is so astonishing is that they're not abandoning a mere idea. They're abandoning a person. They're abandoning him who called you in the grace of Christ.

The person they're abandoning is Christ. It's God himself as they move away from the gospel. This isn't about Paul who's writing this letter. Paul doesn't really care about himself. What is astonishing is that they are deserting God himself, a person.

It's a very personal thing. They're drifting away from him. And this is the God who, as we've just read, Paul's pointed out, has called them in the grace of Christ.

[8 : 32] Christ. The Bible sometimes speaks of us being saved as being a call. It's a call from darkness to light. God is calling out to us and brings us into new life.

In other words, we don't look for God. But instead, God calls out to us and rescues us. That's what his grace does, this free gift that he gives. We don't deserve it.

If he wasn't working in our lives, we wouldn't come to him. But he does it out of his great love for us. And of course, he does it through Jesus on the cross.

We are saved by him. He has died and he has been risen from the dead. And that's what we keep our eyes on. That's our instrument to keep us level. And so Paul is astonished that they are deserting the one who has rescued them in the grace of Christ.

The one who has called them in that grace. And that they are turning to a different gospel. The Father's done it for them, Paul's saying. He's made it happen and they've deserted him.

[9 : 36] Maybe you've had someone stop talking to you. Someone you thought was your friend. They just kind of drift away over time perhaps. Or even suddenly stop talking to you.

Stop contacting. You wonder what you've done wrong. And maybe you try. They just don't seem interested in being in touch with you and being your friend. They've left the friendship and seem to have moved on.

And that's kind of what we're doing when we drift from the gospel. We are not just drifting a concept. We're not even just drifting from a church from our brothers and sisters in Christ.

We are actually going away from God. Deserting the one who has loved us, cared for us, given us the thing. The forgiveness that we need most in this world. And that's how serious what Paul is talking about here.

That's how serious it is. Drifting from the king. The one who offers the greatest of gifts. The one who offers his own son. The one who has forgiven us. Has done all these things.

[10 : 35] And yet if we lose the gospel, we are losing him. We are turning our back on him. We are the turncoats. And so as we live today, as we live here in Glasgow or wherever else, well, we need to know God and view faith not as some ideology, something cold, something abstract, but to recognize that when we place faith, we are placing it, as Paul will say later, is faith in Christ.

It's faith in a person. That this is, it's maybe a cliché, but it's a real relationship that we have with God. It is not a detached thing, but it is a personal relationship where we can call on God as our father.

And we are his sons and daughters. And it is a wonderful thing. And it is knowing God that we need, knowing his word, being in communication with him through prayer and through listening to what he says in the Bible, not keeping God at arm's length, not having it on the periphery of our lives, not having him on the periphery of our lives, but keeping him close.

And that requires patience from us sometimes. It requires effort from us sometimes. And we don't always feel like doing these things. But the way to keep our eyes on the ball is to look to God.

And it takes discipline. People are in conversation with God as we are communicating with him through the Bible and prayer. Our allegiance, our friendship is with God himself.

[12 : 15] And we need that relationship above all else in a world where there are so many things calling out for our attention, so many things that want to turn us away, so many things that want to hold on to us, so many things that will just take our time and they might be good things, our jobs and so on, whatever it might be.

And yet what we need to prioritize above all else is our Savior, is not deserting him, is keeping that closeness to him.

Because when we turn from the good news, when we try and rely on ourselves, then we're turning from the one who loves us and who has saved us. So that is astonishing to Paul.

They are turning from God himself. They are deserting him and turning to a different gospel. Not, of course, that there is another one.

And this is why our second point, he says that people should be accursed. That's what he says, that there are people who should be accursed. That these people, what he's saying when he says accursed is, these people, they ought to be under the wrath of God.

[13 : 24] They ought to be under his curse. And I don't think I need to tell you how serious that is. What he is wishing on them is not something good. This is not how we generally talk or how we would expect people to talk to each other, especially in church.

But what's being made clear is this matters. This gospel matters more than anything else that Paul will or has talked about. It wouldn't go down well if Paul used this language.

Now, you know, especially with social media and things, what people say is scrutinized to just extreme accuracy and making sure they're saying the right thing.

There's so much scrutiny. But what Paul is being is he's not being needlessly offensive, is he? He's being direct. He's being honest with his language. But he's showing that there is something far more important.

What drives him to pronounce this curse is because there are people who are turning them to a different gospel and who want to distort the gospel of Christ. Now, again, it's a very personal thing.

[14 : 31] It's not his honor that's at stake. It's the honor of God, the glory of God. The good news itself is at stake. They have distorted the gospel, or you could say they've turned it on its head, depending how you translate it.

And like that plane spinning out of control, the false teachers have brought the clouds. They've clouded the view of the Galatians to what was truly important, and they've added these little bits on. It could even, this distortion, it could even be translated as strong as they've perverted it. That's how disturbing this gospel turned on its head is. And these false teachers, those who Paul curses, they would have appeared holy.

They would have said many of the right things. They would have sounded so plausible. But it seems from the rest of the letter that they wanted to do things like get these Galatian Christians to be circumcised like Jewish people.

There were Greeks, Gentiles, they're called in the Bible, who weren't circumcised, who weren't ethnically Jewish. And people were coming in saying, well, you can't be a follower of God, a follower of Jesus, unless you're circumcised.

[15:47] And what they're doing is they're adding on what Paul would call works of the law later. They're adding on these things. And what you get is this kind of Jesus plus kind of gospel.

You've maybe heard that expression for Jesus plus. You know, okay, you've believed in Jesus, but now you've got to do this. Now you've got to get circumcised. Now you've got to, whatever it might be. They're saying that there's something more than Christ's sacrifice on the cross needed, something that we have to do.

But the good news of the gospel is there is nothing that we do. It is all what God has done and continues to do through Christ, through the power of his Holy Spirit.

And so today these things, you know, like you say, these were plausible people, people who seemed very holy and godly. And it reminds me, these things don't come in massive grand events. That's why it's important that we hear this message.

But it comes in the subtle things. You know, like a snowfall. Each flake itself is tiny, but they clump together and they form this covering that changes everything.

[16:51] That's how it goes. And today, well, many have written about some of the things that might be emphasised instead of the gospel and cause it to be lost. You know, there's obvious ones. You get the health and wealth gospel, the prosperity gospel, you know, which promises great success to anyone who just has enough faith.

And yes, you believe in Jesus, but now you've got to give your money to the church so that the church can do its mission. You see, it's twisting the gospel so much because, of course, it's good to give, and that is an act of worship.

But when it's being given saying, you know, if you do this, then you'll be blessed. Then you'll have more. If you plant this seed of money, then it's going to grow up into a money tree, I suppose. You know, they're saying these kind of things.

They're adding to the gospel, making false promises, saying, you need Jesus, yes, but then you need to do this or that. And that's one obvious twisting of the gospel.

And yet some things can take control that, again, can be very good things. You know, the emphasis, as one person said, becomes family values or something similar.

[17:58] And again, it can be good, but when it becomes the thing that defines a church or Christianity, and then it ends up excluding those who are seeking Jesus and yet don't feel they match up, who don't feel they've got it all together, it's a good thing, yes, but not the good news.

Of course, there's always religious tradition, respectability, a good name, keeping to the things that previous generations did, minus the gospel, majoring on the minors, forgetting what Paul says really matters.

That can be the Jesus plus thing. Yes, you believe in Jesus, but you've got to do this. You've got to go to this meeting. You've got to do that.

But I think what most often it becomes is the gospel of self, where it turns into a faith that is geared towards my personal fulfillment.

That's the other gospel that I think is so common, because our society is very me-centered, isn't it? And we get sort of infected by that. What can I get out of faith?

[19:08] It becomes, what is God teaching only me? What am I going to learn in church? I hope things are the way that I like them. I hope the songs that we sing are the ones that I like.

You know the kind of attitude. And it never becomes, how am I going to love my neighbor? How am I going to serve Jesus? How am I going to share my faith?

And of course, it can be from ministers. It can be even from the pulpit when sin is never spoken about. Or when Jesus becomes a nice inspirational figure.

But not the Son of God. Not God himself. All these things are seen in different ways through many churches. And it matters for us tonight, because what you and me and every one of us needs is the message of the gospel.

And anything else will dilute that, will distract from it. If we try and say, well, if you do this, then you're a Christian, then someone's going to do that. Because it's so, we like to do things.

[20 : 12] We like to be the one who's in control. We like to be the one who can carry out the work. Oh, of course I can do that. And that makes me a good person. That makes me a Christian. Well, great. But what is harder for us to surrender control and say, I believe, I have faith in Christ.

And there is nothing that I can add. And I am not the one who is in control. I am not the center of the universe. And I need you. That is a lot harder for us in a way.

But what we need is that gospel that tells us that we need Christ to die for us. And that he has died for us. And that he has risen from the dead. And he invites us to believe in him. That's what saves. Not simply the words, not the messenger either. But Christ himself saves. And it's important as well that we hold on to the gospel if we believe already.

The personality, the power even of people, isn't what hoodwinks us. You know, Paul himself says, I'm sure Paul's aware, he's a big personality, he's written half the New Testament, hasn't he?

[21 : 15] And even he says, if even I or anyone with me tells you a different gospel to the one I preached, let them be accursed. Even an angel, he says, if they speak a different message, he's saying, let them be accursed.

It is the message. It is the savior behind the message that matters. And he's so clear about it.

Verses 7 and 8, they practically, sorry, verses 8 and 9, they practically say the same thing, don't they?

How centrally important this is. Only the gospel. Anything different, anything that adds, anything that takes away, anything that distorts it, turns it on its head, clouds it, get rid of it.

Don't have it. Be in the gospel. And the thing is, these are people who have come from Jerusalem. They're part of the church.

They're saying they're Christians. And it's the reminder that the church's greatest danger, someone else said this, by the way, not me, the church's greatest danger is not the anti-gospel outside the church, it is the counterfeit gospel inside the church.

[22 : 23] And that's challenging, isn't it, for us to think about. We must hold on to the gospel of grace, this free gift given, holding on to that and trying to show that grace, the free gift of God.

Nothing else will save us. Nothing else will do it. That's exactly what we need. And that is what we need to be communicating with this world. You know, sometimes we can just even accidentally fall into a way of speaking that kind of makes it seem like there's more to do, that there's stuff to add on.

But no, it's faith in Christ. And that is what we tell others. We need this message. And what is at stake? Why this is so important? Why we need this is because what is at stake is that the eternal lives of many who need the gospel, the greatest need that we all have.

This is not something that is trivial. This is not something that is unimportant. This is the central truth that we must hold on to. This gospel, this good news, the one gospel, that Christ was born, lived, the Son of God, born, lived, died on the cross, taking our place, taking our sin on his shoulders, and then rising from the dead so that we could be born again to new life.

That is what he does. That is what we hold on to. That is what shapes the way that we live, everything that we do. That is what can cause us to show love to others, to love God, to love our neighbor as ourselves.

[23 : 57] And anything else must be thrown out. But the thing is, when we have the gospel, when we hold to the gospel, what does Paul teach us?

Well, that's where approval comes from. That's our third point, approved. One of the big things that most people probably struggle with is approval.

And as Christians, those of us who believe, we can struggle with that. To be a gospel-believing Christian is most likely to be an outsider in most societies throughout history.

Yes, there can be sort of very moderate churches, very moral, but to be a sort of evangelical, gospel-believing Christian, well, that, in most places, makes you an outsider.

And, you know, when we go to work, we're looking for approval. When we're with our friends, we're looking for approval. When we meet new people, we're looking for approval. And I think this, more than anything, can be tempting to take us away from the gospel just as we go about our lives.

[25 : 01] Maybe we want to fit in, or maybe what we struggle with is comparison. We feel like we've always got to match up with others, always comparing ourselves, always wanting to please others so that they'll like us.

And it's so common to speak from experience. And what Paul says is, for am I now, verse 10, am I now seeking the approval of man or of God, or am I trying to please man?

If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. What Paul's saying is that he's not trying to win friends. He's not trying to be cozy with other people, with other philosophies.

What he wants to do is make God's name great, is to show the goodness of Jesus, is to defend the gospel, and to show, to keep that at the center of all that they do.

And so his approval comes from knowing that he is accepted by God, that what God thinks about him matters more than anything else, and that if he is standing up for God's truth, if he is doing what God has called him to do, then that's all he needs.

[26 : 05] And he is confident that he has God's approval. He has renounced the opinion of others. Can you imagine being able to live with that freedom?

Paul's not concerned with people pleasing. Why are we so concerned? Clearly he's not concerned. He's willing to call curses on people. But those who spoke to the Galatians, these false teachers, they seem to have accused Paul of this, or something like that.

But Paul's saying three things in this that we need to hear today. That to be a Christian, first of all, who holds on to the gospel, will not please others.

And that's hard for us to swallow sometimes. It's not going to make us popular in this world. It's not going to give us some societal advantage. It's not going to ever be the cool thing to do. What we see in the New Testament is Paul and others willing to die for their faith.

The very opposite of people pleasing. This is so much more important than what others think of as God's approval matters more.

[27 : 13] Of course, it's maybe worth saying it's not trying to displease others either, as sometimes we may sadly try to do. It's the acknowledgement that standing for gospel truth will go against what others think.

But it's not trying to displease others. It's the offense of the cross, not just being offensive. And then, the second thing is, though, so we need to hold on to the gospel and it won't please others.

Second, we will have the approval of the one who really matters. The good news is, in all this, what isn't in some ways a challenging passage, but in all this, is that the approval of one who really matters, that God approves of those who follow him, that God approves of anyone who comes to him in faith.

There is no entrance exam, there is no test, there is no interview, there is no hoop to go through, ladder to climb. God approves of the one who comes to follow him.

It's as simple as that. And no matter who we are, we can follow God and God will approve. And I say especially because some people can see churches as places of only guilt and shame or places where they're not welcome, but the message that Paul brings is always, and he always comes back to it, is one of acceptance and approval from God.

[28 : 40] Not because of anything we do or will do or have done, but because he loves us, because he has, he has died for us, he has done this because he has loved us.

And it's not that he just winks at sin and says don't worry about it, forget about it. In a way he does, but the gospel tells us that actually the price has been paid. Jesus has done it on the cross.

And in fact, this morning in Helmsborough, we were looking at this, if you go to chapter 2, we're told, verse 20, I've been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

That's how we become good in God's eyes. We're crucified with Christ. He dies in our place and it's as if we've done it. And so we're welcomed with open arms and he approves of us, not because of what we've done, but because Christ has died and he's gone in our place.

And so we have the approval of the one who really matters. When we think about the things that we worry about, the people that we worry about, their opinions, and it seems so big, it seems so difficult for us, and it is.

[29 : 55] Let's not just minimize these things, and yet at the same time, what could be better than knowing that the creator of all things, that the God who is king, who is all-powerful, he looks at you, he looks at me, and he doesn't see our sin, he doesn't see our brokenness in the same way that we do, he doesn't see all the wrong that we've done, he doesn't see all these things, instead he sees someone who he approves of, who he loves, who he has given his son for, and who he is not ashamed to call his daughter, his son, whoever we are, he welcomes us, he approves of us, and that is the good news of the gospel, and that is that, third of all, that sets us free from needing the approval of others, from playing that comparison game, because as we said, he approves, this creator of all things, does it really matter what other people think if that's true, we have Christ, and no one's opinion can change what he says about us, what anyone says can't change what he says about us, we're the children that he delights, and that is real freedom, real liberation, that is real good news, that is the gospel, approval comes from God when we're looking to Jesus on the cross, and that's what we need, that's what we can't be taken away, and when we go away from that, when we try and add to that, when we take away from that, when we look to other things, when we try and rely on ourselves, that's when we drift away, and when we start to worry about others think, because our whole foundation isn't built on Christ, on the cross, it's built on the things that we do, and we get taken away, but hold on to this, that approval comes from

God, and from him alone, and that he has loved us so much, that he has given his beloved son for us, and going back to verse 20 of chapter 2, the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me, that is the gospel, that is what shapes our lives, that is what we must hold on to, son of God gave his life, loved me, and gave himself for me, can you say that, can you hold on to that, can you be confident in that, not because of what you've done, not because of what I've done, but because Christ has died, and approves, and loves you, and will welcome you with open arms, he will accept you completely, may God bless these thoughts to us, let's pray to him, Father, we come to you, and we do marvel that you accept us, we know how often we try to make ourselves good, how often we compare ourselves to others, how often we look down on others, or how often we just think that we're not worthy, and Lord, we know that in a way we're not worthy, but wonderfully

Christ is worthy, and has died in our place, Lord, help us to hold on to these things, to never get distracted from them, we confess that often we do, that often we try and build our own righteousness, we try and do things ourselves, we don't live in reliance on you, and we drift away from that good news, that gospel, that Christ has died in our place, but help us always to turn to you, to turn back to you, to keep our eyes on the cross, to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author, the perfecter of our faith, and to never desert him who has loved us.

So Lord, we lift all these things to you, we ask them all in the name of Jesus, Amen.