

Different People, Same Gospel

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[0 : 0 0] Well, one of the first things I want to do tonight as we continue in Galatians is to introduce to you Saul of Tarsus. Now, some of you might be wondering, who's Saul of Tarsus?

Well, Saul was Paul before he became an apostle. Actually, I think that's wrong. It should be Paul was Saul, I think, before he became an apostle. Either way, Paul the apostle, the author of Galatians, went by the name of Saul before he became a Christian.

Nowadays, if you want to find out about someone, what do you do? You search the internet. So that's what I did. Unfortunately, Saul does not have a Facebook account, but I did find a few photos of him.

Actually, photos is probably not the right word. It's paintings. So the first one is from the Eastern Orthodox tradition. That's a picture of Paul. And the other, from a medieval painter called Albrecht Durer.

Yeah, I think that one's a bit... Yeah. I don't know whether any... They look nothing like each other, I don't think, except for the beard. So I can't really tell which is more like Saul.

[1 : 1 0] I'll leave you to decide for yourself. Bit of a toss of the coin. Thankfully, though, the Bible gives us a rich account of his life, in part because he wrote many of the letters that are in the New Testament.

But also we have from Luke, in his writings of Acts, writings about Paul's activities. And so it's in Acts that we first encounter Saul.

And he was there at the stoning of Stephen, the very first Christian martyr. So here in Acts chapter 7 and verse 57, which I've got on the slide, a bit small, but hopefully you can read it.

Those who were stoning Stephen left their coats or cloaks at Saul's feet. You see, if you wanted to stone someone properly, you'd take out your outer coat, so as to be able to have a clean swing.

And although Saul wasn't physically involved, he was standing there giving his approval for their killing. He was cheering them on. Saul, you see, was a Jew steeped in Judaism.

[2 : 1 8] And he was happy to see any threat to his religion quashed. In his letters to the Philippians, which I've got on the slide again, this is how he used to see himself.

He said, if someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more. Circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews.

In regard to the law, a Pharisee. As for zeal, persecuting the church. As for righteousness based on the law, faultless. So if they were giving awards out at Jewish law school, Saul would be the ducks.

What we find next in Acts is Saul hunting down these Christians and dragging them to prison. He couldn't stand to see this fledgling religion called Christianity undermine the religion he's given his whole life to.

But it was on his way to Damascus. That's why we have the phrase road to Damascus. That Jesus himself appears to him and turns his life around completely.

[3 : 29] And what he does is he ends up serving the very one that he was persecuting. And so those are the very events that Paul refers to here as we begin to look at verse 11 of chapter 1.

So look with me. He says in verse 11, Exactly what we saw last week.

Exactly how Tiff introduced tonight. Then going on. Therefore you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism. How intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.

I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people. And was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when God who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace.

was pleased to reveal his son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles. My immediate response was not to consult any human being.

[4 : 40] So in addition to what we already know from Acts. What we have here as well are Paul's insights onto those events. And in particular what we read in verses 15 and 16.

Paul says in those verses that everything that's happened is the result of God's grace. He was set apart from his mother's womb by God's grace.

And called to be an apostle by God's grace. And last week I said that what lies at the heart of the gospel about the good news of Jesus is God's grace.

Jesus' death for us is the greatest demonstration of God's grace for us. But here in Paul's own life he also experiences God's grace.

For God seeks him out and rescues him from his sins. Even though he as a persecutor of Jesus God's son deserves nothing of that sort.

[5 : 41] Now based on our first Old Testament reading today. You'll notice that Jeremiah was called in a very similar fashion to Paul. So I'll go back to those verses which are on the screen.

You'll notice the same phrases being used. It says before I was formed in the womb I knew you. Before you were formed in the womb I knew you.

Before you were born I set you apart. I appointed you as a prophet to the nations. That's what God says to Jeremiah. And so you might think based on those two readings of Paul and Jeremiah.

That it's only the important people like prophets and apostles that are called in this way. But that's simply not the case. Because God knows each one of us in the same intimate and personal way.

He isn't just interested in the big events in the world. Or the big people in the world like presidents and prime ministers. No, as Psalm 139 says, and I've got it on the slide.

[6 : 42] He created each of our inmost beings. He knitted each of us in our mother's womb. And he sovereignly ordains each of our days before even one of them comes to pass.

And when he saves us, he seeks us out one by one. Just as Jesus describes it in the parable of the lost sheep.

And I've got the parable up on the slide as well. Like a shepherd, God leaves behind the 99 in order to go out to find the one that is lost. And when he finds him or her, he joyfully carries them on his shoulder and brings each sinner home.

Who repents. Now the thing is, that's wonderful, isn't it? To know that God does that for each of us. But the thing is, have you ever wondered that even though God has had his eye on Paul from the very beginning, have you ever wondered why he still allowed Paul to go through all these other things?

You know, to persecute the church. To be trained as a zealous Pharisee. Why didn't God just call him straight away? And the reason is, it's because of God's grace.

[8 : 02] Now what do I mean by that? It's that God actually wanted Paul to see that without his grace, Paul would have just kept floundering on his own. He could have all the zeal in the world and that wouldn't have been enough.

He is the smartest guy in Jewish law school. And yet, it didn't help him to recognize Jesus as God's son. And that's the same with all of us as well.

Left to our own devices, we are all lost. Left to our own efforts, we end up doing more wrong than right. And you may have thought that if God really loved you, then he wouldn't have put you in the mess that you find yourself in in the first place.

And he wouldn't have allowed you to make all these mistakes. And because of that, maybe you think God doesn't love you. Or maybe you think that's why he can't be real. But the truth is, he wants to show each of us our need for his grace.

That unless he comes and rescues us and calls us, we would never be able to get out of our own mess. So if you are feeling a bit overwhelmed by the mess in your life at the moment, or you're overcome by guilt because of all the mistakes you've made, then please know this.

[9 : 27] You can turn to God right now in your hour of greatest need. Because God is calling you by his grace. You realize that you need him.

And you can turn to him right now by believing in his son Jesus. Well, having established that he was called by God's grace, Paul now goes on to demonstrate that his apostolic authority is independent of Jerusalem.

Back in verses 11 and 12, Paul's already said that the gospel he preaches is not of human origin, but received directly from Jesus. Then in verse 16, Paul says that after his calling, he made it a point not to consult with any human being.

And in particular, he didn't go to Jerusalem to see the apostles. Instead, he went to Arabia and Damascus. Now, if you're not familiar where Arabia and Damascus is, I've got a little map on the screen for you.

Galatians, that bit in the red, where Paul is writing to. But Arabia is what surrounds Palestine. It's not quite English. It's Palestina. Maybe Latin or something.

[10 : 36] Anyway, Arabia is what surrounds Palestine. And Jerusalem and Judea are in Palestine. The city of Damascus is not shown, but it's in where Syria is today or where Syria was as well.

So Paul didn't go to Jerusalem or Judea. It's only after three years had passed, we read in verse 18, that Paul makes a brief 15-day visit to Jerusalem.

It's a two-week holiday. All right? Have you been on two-week holidays? It comes and goes really quickly. And even then, when he goes to Jerusalem, he meets only Cephas, who is also known as Peter, and James.

And then, as soon as he's there, he's off to Syria and Cilicia, which is again on the map there right next to Galatia. And so as a result of that, he says that he remains unknown personally to the churches in Judea that are in Christ.

However, the churches in verse 23, hearing the report that the man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy, they respond by praising God because of him.

[11 : 43] Now, this last comment is important because although Paul's authority was independent of Jerusalem, he also wanted the Galatians to know that his ministry to them was well received by those in Jerusalem and Judea.

Because having argued his independence in chapter 1, now as we turn to chapter 2, Paul wants to show the Galatians that he actually shared the same gospel with the apostles in Jerusalem.

In other words, he wanted them to know that he was in partnership with the apostles in Jerusalem, and they were both serving the same God, and actually that the same God was working through them, even though their context is different.

Now, why is this important for the Galatians to know? Because as we saw last week, those who were perverting the gospel were coming and trying to drive a wedge between Paul and the apostles in Jerusalem.

So if you look at my slide, they were trying to suggest that they, the false believers in the middle, were in the same circle with the 12 apostles in Jerusalem.

[12 : 55] They were the ones with the correct gospel, with the right message from God, while Paul was on the altar. And so with that, they were trying to convince the Galatians not to follow Paul, or what Paul had been teaching, but to turn and follow the false believers with their false gospels.

Well, Paul says the reality is on the next slide, is actually the other way around. It was Paul and the apostles that are in the true gospel, not them. Paul and the 12 are faithful to the true gospel, and the false believers are outside the magic circle, as it were.

And so as I read verse 1 of chapter 2, I want to ask you to try and see if you can follow this logic. So verse 1, Then after 14 years, I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas.

I took Titus along also. I went in response to a revelation, and meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders, I presented them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles.

I wanted to be sure I was not running, and had not been running my race in vain. Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek.

[14 : 10] This matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, and to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

As for those who were held in high esteem, whatever they were makes no difference to me. God does not show favoritism. They added nothing to my message.

So Paul, on the one hand, asserts that the apostles added nothing to his message, and yet on the other, at the start of this passage, he sought recognition for his ministry, so as to affirm that actually they were preaching the same gospel.

He wasn't looking for their validation, but he wanted the Galatians to know that they were in this together. And in particular, as Paul went up to Jerusalem, he did so with the purpose of defending the gospel that he had been preaching to the Gentiles, and showing them how it was being applied, the freedoms that were being applied to the Gentiles.

And the sticking point was circumcision. The false believers were insisting that the Gentiles had to be circumcised, just like the Jews, in order to be saved.

[15 : 28] But Paul's point was that although the gospel was the same, how a Christian applied it may differ, depending on whether they were a Jew or a Gentile.

So Paul used Titus as a test case. As a Greek, Paul insisted that for the sake of the gospel, he was not to be circumcised, and the apostles in Jerusalem agreed, and did not compel him to be circumcised.

Why? Because if, verse 4, if that was being done, then that would have been to rob the Gentiles of the freedom that they had in Christ Jesus, and to make them slaves, thereby undermining the grace of the gospel.

The gospel would become something they had to do to be safe, and that was a distortion of the message of the gospel. And yet we have to realize that Paul wasn't actually against circumcision in and of itself.

He himself was circumcised as a Jew, and if you look at Acts 16 and verse 1, which I've got on the slide, Paul had another disciple, Timothy, circumcised, because although his father was a Greek, his mother was Jewish.

[16 : 44] And if you read further down, Paul did this because the Jews who lived in Timothy's area all knew his father was Greek. Now, in this case, Timothy's circumcision clarified his Jewish ancestry.

It allowed him to actually be a stronger witness for the gospel because he could now testify that even as a Jew, the gospel had now freed him to be in fellowship with the Gentiles.

He was able to eat with them, those who were not circumcised. He was in union with them, in unity with them, even though they weren't circumcised, and he was. In other words, he was actually emphasizing the freedom of the gospel, the grace of the gospel.

But he, Paul, circumcised Timothy in order to demonstrate that. So you see that in the one instance, Timothy is circumcised, in the other, Titus isn't, and yet it's both done for the sake of the same gospel.

Seemingly opposite application, but in both instances, Paul was defending the truth of the gospel. Now, how might we apply this today?

[17 : 56] Well, I'm not sure I have any perfect example, but perhaps let's take alcohol for an instance. So the question is, does drinking alcohol express or detract from the freedom of the gospel?

As a Christian, should you drink or not? Well, the answer is, it depends, doesn't it? So if you used to be a Muslim, for example, and had grown up thinking that you had to follow strict rules, including not to drink, then to please God, in order to please God, then drinking alcohol, if done in moderation and provided your conscience was clear, may be an expression of gospel freedom.

You would be saying that I'm no longer observing rules in order to find favor before God, but that it is by faith in Jesus alone that I was saved.

But on the other hand, if your past had been one of wild and drunken parties, then maybe abstaining is your expression of gospel freedom. It would show that alcohol no longer has a hold over you like it used to, that you weren't slave to that sin any longer.

So depending on context, both applications may be right. But again, what is common is the desire to defend or express the truth of the gospel.

[19 : 23] I'll take another example, that of fasting and praying on certain days. Again, if your upbringing had been one where it was drummed into you that if you don't fast when you pray, God's not going to listen to you, then it becomes legalistic for you.

And maybe for the sake of the gospel, it is better for you not to fast. But if that's not your history, then maybe it's okay to fast when you pray because that for you is an expression of dependence on God.

Now, which should you practice as a Christian? Well, it depends on your own circumstance, doesn't it? But in all cases, what is uppermost, what is most important is that you express the truth of the gospel and defend it.

Now, I suppose I could give you one more last example and that is the way we often treat certain renowned or maybe not so renowned theologians or preachers. So people like Calvin or Luther or preachers like Don Carson or Peter Adam, which I know many of us read and listen to in order to grow in our faith.

Now, that's fantastic, but then sometimes what we start to do is we start to idolize them, don't we? Or use their teaching as the sole basis of orthodoxy.

[20 : 35] We decide who we can have fellowship with depending on whether they agree with Calvin or not, say. And when we do that, what we've started to do is to add to the gospel, haven't we? We're starting to imply that salvation isn't by grace alone, but by how much we understand this or that theologian.

Now, please don't get me wrong, you know, I think the church is indebted to people like Calvin. He's God's gift to the church. He's helped many people, in fact, from falling away to false gospels.

But to then say that people can't be orthodox Christians just because they haven't heard of John Calvin or they can't identify themselves as Calvinists, that's not right, is it?

I mean, if you ask John Calvin himself, he would be the first to say that we're saved by faith alone, not by whether we agree with his theology. And after all, there are many Christians that have lived and died, some as martyrs, before he was even born.

And there are even godly Christians today in China, in Africa, that haven't read any of his works. So the question becomes, for the sake of the gospel, should we recommend people to study Calvin's writings?

[21 : 44] Well, in most cases, the answer is yes, because I know Calvin would help them to understand God's word better. But if we as a church start going around saying Calvin said this, Calvin said that, and we start to interpret the Bible only through his lens, then maybe the answer is no.

Because we want the gospel to be free of all these added things. We don't want people to say that they can't understand the gospel unless they've read this person or that person.

Because to say that is to imply that the gospel as found in God's word is not enough. And that's a false gospel as we saw last week, which is no gospel at all. So I think what we need then is a really crystal clear understanding of the gospel from God's word so that we can defend its truth and then apply it correctly according to each person's situation and context.

And this is the recognition that eventually dawned on them. The apostles in Jerusalem recognized that Paul had the same authority and calling as they did. Only they were called to the Jews and Paul was called to the Gentiles.

So in verse 7, they recognized that they said, they recognized that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the uncircumcised just as Peter had been to the circumcised.

[23 : 06] For God who was at work in Peter as an apostle to the circumcised was also at work in me as an apostle to the Gentiles. And then what they then did was extend the right hand of fellowship.

James, Cephas, and John, these esteemed as pillars gave me and Barnabas, the right hand of fellowship or partnership is the Greek word for it when they recognized the grace, there's that word again, grace given to me.

They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I have been eager to do all along.

So what they did was recognized that Paul and Barnabas are equal partners with them in the gospel. And so the only condition they imposed or suggested even was for Paul to remember the poor, which I think meant to remember the poor that was suffering.

There was a famine in Judea at that time, to remember them. And this was something Paul was eager to do. Why? Because it expressed gospel unity between the Jews and the Gentiles, Gentiles helping the Jews that were in need.

[24 : 15] But aside from that, Paul was free to preach the gospel to the Gentiles and to apply its truth as appropriate to their context. And in their context, that meant in the main no need for circumcision.

While the other apostles would preach to the circumcised, those who were already circumcised, and apply the gospel to that context. And for some of them, that meant they kept keeping some of the Jewish food laws.

Friends, the wonderful thing about God's gospel is that it doesn't matter what our background and circumstances are. It's the same gospel that saves all of us.

Now, some of us may have grown up in godly families with godly parents. Others are called from, you know, non-Christian background. Some of us may even have had really checkered pasts.

But it's still the same message of Jesus' death and faith in Him that rescues each and every one of us from sin. And it's only when God calls each of us by His grace, none of us come to Him except by God's grace, that we turn to Him and turn to His Son, Jesus.

[25 : 29] And yet, depending on our context, our history, our culture, how we express this gospel, freedom, may look a bit different from person to person. Some things will be the same.

Where the truth of the gospel is at stake, that's the same. But then there'll be other things that may apply to each of us slightly differently, depending on how that best expresses God's grace in our life, the freedom that we now have in the gospel.

When we are saved, we are truly set free with no debt, no further debt to play. So I just want to leave that with you for tonight. Next week, we'll look again at this whole Jew and Gentile sort of divide and work out how the gospel then allows people to live and be in community with one another.

So let me pray as we conclude. Father, thank you for setting each of us apart from birth so that you can call us by your grace and give us the gift of faith in your son Jesus.

Help us to live truly and faithfully in the freedom of the gospel. Help us to see how culture and background matters and so not be judgmental of others who may apply their gospel freedom differently.

[26 : 48] Help us to be wise so that those of us who teach or disciple others will do so in a way which truly defends the truth of the gospel. We pray and ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
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