

Danger!

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[0 : 00] Last Christmas, my wife Rachel and I were debating whether to tell our son RJ, who's only four, the truth about Santa Claus. Rachel was concerned that not doing so would be like lying, deceiving.

And it might distract RJ from that other beardy bloke at Christmas, Jesus. I said, what's the harm? RJ will learn the truth soon enough.

Besides, we don't want him going to kindy and terrifying all his mates by saying Santa's not real. And so last year we kept the truth to ourselves because what's the harm?

For the record, Rachel insisted that we come clean about the Easter bunny. So we did that. But anyway, you see, what's the harm? What's the harm is a really popular attitude here in Australia, isn't it?

It stops us taking things too seriously. So again, I've got an uncle who has never let the truth get in the way of a good story. All the cousins, we all know he's telling fibs, but we never call him out because he's just spinning an Aussie yarn.

[1 : 11] What's the harm? A tax time, isn't it? A few dodgy deductions here. A bit of non-declared income over there. A few hundred dollars back in your pocket isn't going to cause a budget deficit.

What's the harm? You see, surely we can have our cake and eat it too. Surely it's only a little bit of this or a little bit of that. What's the harm?

And that is the attitude that Paul is addressing in this part of Galatians. Remember, the Galatians were a mature church, but they got into a mess about salvation.

They used to follow Paul's gospel. Salvation is by faith alone. But they were deceived by some false teachers who said, if you want to be right with God, you must also be circumcised.

After all, that's what all the heirs of Abraham did. And to the Galatians, a bit of Jesus and a bit of Jewish law, what's the harm? To us here, circumcision sounds so trivial.

[2 : 22] It's not even a thing these days. Why do we need a whole book of the Bible on such a tricky, tiny little issue? It's only adding a few things to Jesus.

He's a forgiving chap. What's the harm? And the answer is, what is underneath? You see, on the surface, it's sort of a minor physical procedure.

But underneath, it's a symbol of how to approach God. It's a symbol of a whole different sort of religion, where our salvation depends on our works and our obedience to laws and good deeds and human effort and all those sorts of things.

In the Galatians' eyes, what's the harm? But in God's eyes, they're saying that faith in Christ is not enough on its own.

They're effectively saying that the law of Moses needs to perfect what Jesus could only begin or only start. You must do this to be saved.

[3 : 26] It's basically saying that Jesus' death on the cross is not enough. God thinks there is a lot of harm with that. What's more, what makes it harder, is a what's-the-harm attitude.

It sounds really like relaxed religion, doesn't it? It sounds more open-minded, less narrow. It sounds more loving and less judgmental and certainly more tolerant.

Tolerant is not how people would describe the Apostle Paul in this letter. Galatians is him at his most prickly. Just have a listen to some of his comments throughout the letter.

Chapter 1, I am astonished. In other words, I am struck out of my senses that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you. Chapter 1 as well, if even we or an angel from heaven should preach a different gospel, let him be under God's curse.

Chapter 2, he publicly rebukes another Apostle for leading people astray. Chapter 3, you foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? And then there is this gem, which Dorothy did so well for us in Chapter 5.

[4 : 37] As for those agitators preaching circumcision, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves. You would never believe, you would never believe that Jesus' Apostle could speak like that if you didn't read it in the Bible.

You wouldn't think it was there. But I think even more explosive than that is Chapter 5, Verse 4. He says, Can you imagine telling a church of mature Christians who trust in Jesus that if they keep going the way they're going, Jesus will be like an alien to them?

That is, like a foreigner. That he'd be like speaking a different language to you. That he will be a stranger with a different custom. Can you imagine telling a church of mature Christians that that is how Jesus will be to them?

I think that's the most explosive thing. Don't dare ask Paul, what's the harm? His answer is obvious. Our passage today flows out of Chapter 5, Verse 1.

As Dorothy helpfully says, Stand firm then and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Paul's aim today is that we stand firm on the path of faith.

[5 : 57] Stand firm on the path of faith. To help us stand firm, he gives us two warnings. A warning against practicing the religion of works.

And a warning against those who preach the religion of works. So, there are two points today. Two warnings to help us stand firm. I'm going to read from Verse 2. Mark my words.

I, Paul, tell you. Now, before we go any further, do you notice that three times in just seven words, he's mentioned himself?

Mark my words. I, Paul, tell you. He's stamping his apostolic authority on whatever comes next. Mark my words. I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.

Again, I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he's required to obey the whole law. You, who are trying to be justified by the law, have been alienated from Christ.

[7 : 02] You have fallen away from grace. The tone and the feel of his language show that this is clearly a warning passage. In fact, it's four warnings.

If they let themselves be circumcised, however trivial that seems, Christ will be no value to you at all. Verse two, they're required to obey the whole law.

Verse three, they've been alienated from Christ and fourthly, fallen away from grace. That's verse four. You see, the problem with adding a little bit of law to Jesus is it suggests we can approach God via two paths at once.

A little bit of faith and a little bit of works. Paul says you cannot have it both ways. He warns adding some works would be to lose Christ altogether. And the reason why is this.

Because Jesus will not share the salvation stage with anyone. Especially since it's him alone dying on the cross to make us right with God.

- [8 : 10] Remember when Israel were in Egypt in the book of Exodus. God alone saves them through those miraculous signs and wonders. He saves them through the Red Sea.
- It's the biggest rescue in the Bible until you get to the cross. And what did they do? Israel, they built a golden calf straight after. And they said, thank you golden calf for rescuing us.
- God was furious. It's very serious. To try and be justified by the law is to alienate ourselves from Christ.
- You see, it's logically impossible to receive Christ by faith and therefore say, I can't save myself and then try and be justified by the law and claim that you can.
- To even have a little bit of law, however trivial, is to have it all. If you're in for a penny, you're in for a pound. And Paul has laced his passage with that idea.
- [9 : 11] And I've put it, Gwyneth, please, just first slide. It's the first table on your handout. He says, a little bit of circumcision, Christ is no value to you at all.
- In for a penny, in for a pound. That's verse two. A little bit of law, you're required to keep the whole law. A little bit of yeast, works through the whole batch. Verse nine. A little bit of circumcision, go the whole way.
- Verse 12. You see, even a little way down the path of works means we have wholly or entirely come off the path of faith.
- Thanks, Gwyneth. That's what verse five is doing. Have a look at verse five. That's what that's doing. It's showing them what they're falling away from. What I did was, I took verse five and I showed an either or.
- I did the exact opposite of it in the table. And that's the second table on your handout. So either through the flesh, you can eagerly work, keeping the whole law to earn God's righteousness.
- [10 : 11] Or, verse five, through the spirit, we eagerly await by faith, the righteousness which we hope. So either we can try and work for a right standing with God through our flesh, or we can wait for it to come through faith.
- The answer is so obvious, says Paul. Verse six is similar. It's another table on your handout. Verse six, Another either or.
- When it comes to salvation, either you can leave it all up to Jesus, hint, hint, which means circumcision, our good deeds, all of these things don't count.
- They have no value. Or, we can try and top up what we think is missing or lacking in Jesus' death on the cross. And the answer is so obvious.
- But here's the thing. You see, the path of works will be very tempting for those of us here who have a sensitive conscience. See, if you've got a sensitive conscience, you'll probably think you're too sinful for Jesus.
- [11 : 19] And so you're going to try and help Jesus out by topping up, by walking both paths at once. A bit of Jesus for the regular sins in my life.
- And then I will earn or work off the really dark stuff that I've done. The things that I don't think even Jesus' death could manage. And while that may be really well-intentioned, whether we know it or not, whether we mean it or not, the harm is, in God's eyes, ultimately we are saying that Jesus' death, Christ crucified, is not enough to deal with our sin.
- That's why it's all or nothing. Adding anything to Christ, even a little bit, we offend Him. We offend God by saying, it's not enough, we lose Christ.
- Salvation is by faith alone, through Christ alone, because of God's grace alone. And this is the fundamental principle of being a Christian.

But to worldly ears out there, faith alone in Christ alone sounds very exclusive. Whereas, what's the harm? Sounds so tolerant and friendly.

[12 : 40] To say that salvation is either in Jesus or we anger God or alienate ourselves from Christ seems so narrow and dismissive of other points of view.

And of course, we shouldn't be so close-minded, especially in 2019. Surely, all religions at all views are just different ways of saying the same thing.

I was at a barbecue last week and I was talking to someone who said, I believe in forces and energies in the world. And they said, Vijay, you probably call that Jesus. And everyone out there would say, everyone out there would say, oh, well, I mean, that sounds okay.

You're all on the same page. What's the harm? Jesus is not some force. It wasn't some energy that died on the cross for my sins.

Jesus is a person. His death for me, for you, was an act of grace from a loving and personal God. To insist on a difference between Jesus and all other worldviews is to declare yourself intolerant in a cosmopolitan culture.

[13 : 46] It's to invite persecution as Paul experienced in verse 11. It's to be narrow and dogmatic. But that is okay. Paul says, stand firm because the real test of a worldview is whether it makes us right with God, whether it saves us from his judgments.

Approaching him with a mix and match sort of attitude might please people in the short term. But remember Paul's warning that even a little bit of another path, Christ will be no value to us at all.

We now have to obey the whole law. We've been alienated from Christ and thus, here is the kicker. We have to face God's judgment alone. Point one, beware of practicing the religion of works.

Point number two, beware of those preaching it. Verse seven, you were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth?

You see, the Christian life has been described by lots of people as a race and if that is true, then Paul is the coach. I want you to imagine that Paul is an athletics coach and he's found some people, he's encouraged them to be athletes and over years and years he's trained them up to an Olympic level.

[15 : 10] Imagine his athletes are in the Olympic final, they're running away and they're heading, they're going really well, a good race, heading for a podium finish and then suddenly a rival coach from another country throws chairs and hurdles in the way of Paul's runners.

Can you imagine how furious he would be? Who cut in on you? Who hindered your race? Who did this? He asks. See, he wants the Galatians to be aware of these rival coaches, these false teachers.

Verse 8, he shows them their origin. That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. False teachers are not from God. He shows them their effect.

Verse 9, a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough. You see, yeast and false teachers are really similar. You see, false teaching spreads through a whole church the way yeast spreads through a whole batch of dough.

And like yeast, you only need a little bit of false teaching to affect the whole batch. Our Old Testament reading, which Ben gave us from Jeremiah, it showed how angry God was at false teaching.

[16 : 23] The passage spoke about how just a few false teachers from Jerusalem had affected the whole land of Israel had turned the whole land into a godless nation.

That same thing is about to happen here in Galatia. Paul cannot have that in his church. Here is the false teacher's end, verse 10. I'm confident in the Lord that you will take no other view.

The one who's throwing you into confusion, whoever that may be, will have to pay the penalty. Again, another reason to beware is they are heading for destruction. Don't go down with them.

Verse 11, you can see false teachers' lies. They lied that Paul endorsed circumcision when clearly he doesn't. Maybe they snuck that lie in because Paul used to be a super Jewish Pharisee in his former life.

Verse 11, but brothers and sisters, if I'm still preaching circumcision, as the false teachers say, why am I still being persecuted? In that case, the offense of the cross has been abolished.

[17 : 29] See, Paul preaches Christ crucified. They preach circumcision and the religion of works. In this series, we've said that every other worldview is part of the religion of works.

It's very popular because it affirms that deep down we're all good enough. We're all good people. We're good enough to save ourselves through our own effort and works.

But preaching Christ crucified, it offends human pride. It says that we're sinners. It says that if we're alienated from Christ, we have to face God's judgment alone.

People hate preachers like that. People hate churches like that, like our one. Preaching Christ crucified is far too exclusive and narrow in an age of tolerance and what's the harm?

People love to have the best of both worlds. We hate being forced to choose either or. Surely it doesn't matter what people believe as long as they believe. Surely it doesn't matter what people have faith in as long as I've got some sort of faith.

[18 : 37] What's the harm? Paul's gospel won't allow Christians to mix and match aspects of our faith with others. Now, of course, other worldviews, other religions have some wisdom about living well in the world.

Of course they do. But remember the test. Can this worldview make me right with God? Can it save me from his judgment?

The gospel, therefore, pushes us to a definite decision, either Christ crucified or the religion of works. The one impossibility is what the Galatians were attempting, that is to mix and match.

A little bit of Jesus, a little bit of works. They thought, what's the harm? Paul says, mark my words. Mark my words. If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all because you'll be required to obey the whole law.

That path means you're alienated from Christ, that you have fallen away from grace. Mark my words, he says. For us here in this church at Holy Trinity, we don't appear, we don't appear to have the issue of false teachers and that's largely due to our heritage.

[19 : 55] Paul Barker, Andrew Reid and now Andrew Price. Andrew Price gets really nice and grumpy if it's anything less than Bible teaching, if it's anything that's not faithful, which is a fantastic sort of reflex.

And so for us, I think part of us standing firm and being aware is not falling into complacency. If it can happen to them, it can happen to us. One application therefore will be to pray for Andrew Price, to pray for the pastors, pray for us, pray that we would be sticking to the message of Christ crucified, to faithful Bible teaching for yourselves.

If we give you anything less than that, that's when you can break out the cricket bats and come and get us. It's that serious, I think. And while we may appear to be safe now, today, as long as it is today we are safe, you don't have to go too far past these doors to be harmed by the false teaching of a different gospel.

And so here are some examples of what is being preached 30 minutes from here. Now this is not about a witch hunt. You're not to go and track these churches down.

But this is just to make us aware so we can stand firm. So 30 minutes from here, you can hear that if you can speak in tongues, you are a sort of second level Christian with a double anointing of the Holy Spirit.

[21 : 29] You can hear that God will always, always heal people. And if he doesn't, the problem is with you. You can hear that God would never punish his son or judge the world because of course he's too loving for that.

You can hear that it's okay to invest everything, all of your everything, into this world alone. Because when Jesus returns, he's going to fully restore this world and all of your investments will carry on.

And worst of all, you can hear that awful prosperity gospel, which says that God wants to prosper you financially in the here and now.

You don't have to go too far past these doors to be harmed by false teaching, teaching which the Bible is very clear about. And so while it seems we're not in harm's way today, the warning would be not to take faithful teaching, not to take a godly senior pastor for granted.

And I just want to finish with a word about moving churches. lots of us here will, for one reason or another, move away from here in their life.

[22 : 44] And that happens. Can I strongly urge you to choose your next location based on the church, not with the church as an afterthought?

And the reason why is this, maybe there was a time when if a sign said Christian church, they were safe places. But as I've just shown you, that is not the case anymore. This is not a safe teaching environment, even in Anglican circles.

And so moving churches has to be like moving in a desert. You know, if you move in a desert, you have to move from water to water or you'll be flat out dead.

You have to move from Bible teaching church to Bible teaching church or you will be flat out dead as a Christian. That's my two cents worth. Here is some encouragement.

from our coach. Verse 10, I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. Let's pray. Father God, thank you that you warn us.

[24 : 00] Thank you that you love us enough to do so. Father, help us to stand firm on faith alone in Christ alone. Help us not to even dabble with a religion of works.

Help us not to trust in anything, even if it's a good thing, other than the blood of Jesus. Father, please protect Andrew Price and the ministry team here.

Please, would he, would us be faithful Bible teachers? would this family here be craving the pure spiritual milk?

Would we have an instinct and a conviction of faithful Bible teaching and nothing else? Father, please protect us. Please grow us to be more like Jesus in a world of what's the harm.

In Jesus' name. Amen.