

One Gospel of Grace

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 0 0] Our Father, as these words are ringing in our ears, we ask that you would speak to us. And as we turn to your word, we pray that you would teach us to love what is most precious, above all things, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For we ask in his name. Amen. If you would open your Bibles to Galatians 1, as Nancy read just a moment ago on page 176, it's lovely.

Some of you at the back may not have heard, but there were two little boys in the children out the front here who in answer to every question would call out Jesus. One would call out Jesus and one would call out God.

And that's a very helpful thing to have in a church, people who stand up and call out Jesus and God. We could do worse. And it reminds me of a true story of a guy who stood up to do the children's time in a service.

He said, boys and girls, I want you to tell me, what's the name of that little furry animal with a fuzzy tail that runs up trees and hides nuts in winter? And there was dead silence. So he asked them again and he asked them again.

[1 : 1 2] Finally, one of the kids put his hand up and he said, I know the right answer is Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel. Jesus is the right answer.

Some time ago, one of my friends gave me a book, very kindly, called Don't Sweat the Small Stuff. You might have seen it. It's for recovering control freaks and it's based on a very sensible notion that we all get ourselves worked up about things that in the end are small and trivial.

It became a number one bestseller over two years and it's been followed up by a number of other books, Don't Sweat the Small Stuff for Men, Don't Sweat the Small Stuff in the Family and all those kinds of things.

And I think the reason for its success is that the author has put his finger on one of the key issues for us today and that is not just that we're so stressed, but we're stressed about the wrong things. And someone needs to write a book, a companion volume called We Must Sweat the Big Stuff.

And then the most important book that will follow that will be the book called How to Tell the Difference. Now, in the New Testament, there is one book that calls on us and says we must sweat the big stuff and it is this book of Galatians.

[2 : 4 3] It's like the canary in the New Testament. You know, when the miners for centuries dug underground, they would always take a canary with them in a cage to see where the real danger was.

If a canary falls asleep or passes out, it's a clear warning that the air is risky. And if you ignore the canary, you do so at the risk of your life. And the big issue for the Apostle Paul and the big issue in the New Testament and the big issue for all those who follow Jesus Christ is the Gospel.

And did you notice in verses 6 to 9, as Nancy read it, that the word Gospel comes five times. When you first become a Christian, you find that Christians have a language all of their own.

We love this word, one of our favourite words is this word, Gospel, good news. Comes from deep in the Old Testament.

When darkness lay over the people, thick darkness covered the peoples. And into that darkness, God gives a word to his prophet Isaiah that a light will shine and God calls that news, Gospel, good news, healing, saving grace, peace.

[4 : 03] When Jesus began his ministry, the first sermon that he preached was the Gospel we read. And he says, the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the Gospel.

And when the Apostles preached the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, they preached the Gospel. And when we come to faith in Jesus Christ, the way in which we come to know God and his salvation and the way that we come to have a connection with him is through the Gospel.

And the way those of us who have been Christians for years and years and years grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ is through the Gospel. It is the source of all we do.

It's the source of all we hope for and all we dream for. It is not just the ABC of Christianity. Some people think that the Gospel is just what we say to those who are not yet Christians.

That is not true. If you think you have fully grasped the Gospel, you haven't begun to. And if you think the Gospel continues to amaze me and confound me and turn me over, then we've begun to grasp the Gospel.

[5 : 17] It's not just the ABC. It's the MNO and it's the XYZ. Last week we saw in the first five verses the Gospel is not a human idea.

It comes from the revelation of God and at the heart of the Gospel is a massive rescue where through the death of Jesus Christ, God has rescued us from this present evil age.

But in verse 6, there is a sudden change in tone. It's hard when we do this week after week. If you miss one, you'll miss a lot. You miss the flow.

But in verse 6, something is terribly wrong. Do you know, in every other, in every other letter in the New Testament, the Apostle writes, he begins by introducing himself and then he writes to the, speaks to the readers and then the third thing he does is he prays a prayer of thanksgiving without fail.

Every New Testament letter except this one. Verse 6, I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ, turning to a different Gospel.

[6 : 25] Not that there is another Gospel, but that there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the Gospel of Christ. Now this passage will come as a deep shock to any of us this morning who think that the Gospel is a small thing or unimportant.

And verses 8 and 9 contain some of the strongest words in all the Bible and they are profoundly counter-cultural, not just to us politically correct Westerners, but in every culture throughout history they have been counter-cultural.

But they are motivated by love and I want you to notice as we go through the passage that the Apostle reserves his strongest words not for those who are reading his letter but for those who are teaching an anti-Gospel.

In fact, I think he's lovely towards the Galatians. He doesn't sock it to them. He doesn't give them what they really deserve. I mean, he could have started his letter and said something like, Dear Galatians, you are absolutely hopeless.

Why did I go through all that pain and suffering for you to just run after the latest thing? I'm ashamed of you. No, no, he doesn't do that.

[7 : 42] He does something far more important. He draws us and points us to the big stuff and specifically two of the biggest things he could and I just, I want to use these two headings as a way of looking at the passage.

And the first big thing I've called big gospel grace. Big gospel grace. Verse 6. Let me read it again. I'm astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ turning to a different gospel.

You notice it is through the gospel that God calls us to himself. If we move away from the apostolic gospel, we move away from the power of God which calls us.

It's through the gospel he calls us. That is how you know whether you have a grasp on Jesus Christ or not. This is a very important word.

When the Bible uses the word call of God, it's different than the way we use the word. We use the word call, I mean our words are weak and powerless.

[8 : 49] We call and nothing happens. Those of us who are parents. We call our children to a meal that we've spent a long time cooking and you hear from the next, some people hear from the next room a kind of a hmm.

But ten minutes later nothing has happened and you must stand up and walk over and turn the television off before anything happens. We call people on the telephone and don't get through.

The Prime Minister has called for the United Nations to be reformed. All our calls in the end are pretty powerless. They are not action. But God's words are action.

God's words are effective reality and they do what he says. Do you remember when God said let there be light? What does the Bible say? It doesn't say he stood up and came down and had to make the light.

When he says let there be light, light happens. When Jesus is standing on the water, sorry, standing in the boat, he says to the storm, peace, be still and it happens.

[9 : 55] And when he's standing at the tomb of Lazarus he says, Lazarus, come out and it is because of the power of his word that it happens. The words of God and the call of God do what God says.

And here is the way we can tell whether we have Jesus Christ in our lives. that we have heard God calling us through the gospel.

You have a sense that God's power is dealing with you. God's power, his voice has intervened in our lives. The gospel is the power of God for salvation.

We hear the voice of God us by name to come to him. And when he intervenes in our lives we know we're not the same afterwards. Just look over to the end of chapter 2 in Galatians.

Very famous verse 20. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. And 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.

[11 : 03] That's it, you see. We don't understand ourselves. There's something new and different in our lives that's come from outside, from the call of God. We're still ourselves but we're not.

You see, when the gospel is preached it's not just information. It's one of the reasons why we don't use PowerPoint. It's because God comes to us personally in the gospel and calls us to himself powerfully.

And did you notice in verse 6 it is only in the grace of Christ. That's how, that's the only place he calls us. Because, you see, Christ came for us and died for us not because we loved him and not because we were doing good and not because we were prospects for him but out of his sheer grace because he loved us.

This is the gospel of big grace. It's completely unnatural. It's completely humbling. It's completely life-giving news. And if you think carefully, every other religion is based on the idea that God will accept me because of what I do.

And the gospel comes and says, no, God will accept me because of what Christ has done. And when I believe the gospel and I place my faith in those words, I get him.

[12 : 40] So to lose the gospel is to lose him. And that is why the apostle writes in such distress. You see, it's not just that these people were turning away Paul's version of things, as though that were important.

They are turning away from Christ himself. If we turn away from the gospel that the apostle received from Jesus Christ, we turn away from Christ himself. We say that a different way.

It is not possible to retain our personal allegiance to Christ Jesus if you change the gospel that you believe. And we will see this as we go through the book.

New teachers had come into Galatia and they said, yes, certainly Jesus is the Son of God, certainly he died and rose again from the dead, but that's not enough. You need to complete what Jesus did by keeping the law in all its parts to be acceptable to God.

And when we begin to think that we make ourselves acceptable to God by anything except the death of Jesus, we skewer God's grace and we desert the person of Jesus Christ.

[13 : 49] Jesus died for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age. That's why we call him our saviour. We've said it already. We will say it again in this service. He is our saviour. That is hugely embarrassing.

It's an embarrassment to other religions certainly. I mean, if you went to Buddha or if you went to Muhammad and called them saviour, they would not be in the slightest bit pleased with you. But here is the radical grace of God in the gospel.

That when we were lost in our sins and enemies of God, Jesus came to do for us what we couldn't do for ourselves and to rescue us. And through the announcement of this gospel, God calls us to himself.

We hear his voice. We receive forgiveness and we receive him. That's the first big thing, big gospel grace. But there is a second point and I've called it big gospel danger.

Look down at verse 7, please. He says not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.

[14 : 56] There is only one gospel. And if it is through the gospel that God calls us through the grace of Christ, trouble comes when we move away from it.

You can move away from the gospel by adding things to it or by taking things away from it. And here it's a very interesting word in verse 7. He says that there are these false teachers who are perverting it.

The word literally means reversing it, changing it round. In other words, the Christian gospel has a particular order to it.

There's a content and there's a structure. And if you turn it round, you empty of its power, you pervert it. This word is used in the Bible for changing the sun to darkness, changing your laughter to tears.

And it goes from being good news to bad news. verse 8. Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preach to you, let him be accursed.

[15 : 59] The word means literally eternally condemned. Verse 9. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.

Now, it's very important for us this morning to feel the full weight of this. Paul does not say, there are people teaching bad teaching, avoid them.

Don't listen to them. No, he says, let those who teach a different gospel be eternally condemned. This is very strong meat, isn't it?

I mean, look over at chapter 5, verse 22. The fruit of the Spirit, says Paul, is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

And then he turned back to chapter 1, verses 8 and 9, let them be accursed. But you see, there is no conflict between these two things. Because the gospel is so good, to pervert it is so bad.

[17 : 18] And if you and I cannot feel this way about the gospel, it means we have not begun to grasp the grace of Christ. I have a file on my computer called the 24-hour file.

Some of you may have the same. And when I, it's for letters that I write when I'm really steamed. You know those letters that you write where you say everything you want to say, but shouldn't say really.

I put them in the 24-hour file and I come and look at them the next day and I don't think I've ever sent one of them. This is not a temper tantrum from the apostle.

He is not writing this in the heat of the moment and thinking, well, maybe I shouldn't send it. This is calmly thought out and it comes from a love of Christ and a love of his readers.

In fact, the fact that he says it twice, verse 8, and repeats it again in verse 9, shows that he's not having an uncontrollable tirade. It's very carefully written because we must see the big gospel danger.

[18 : 19] Just look at verse 8. Question, who is the first person who is placed under the warning of this curse? It is he himself.

See, there's no shred of personal vindictiveness in these words. So important is the gospel that the apostle puts himself on notice. He says, if any person distorts the gospel of grace, teaches a distorted gospel, that person ought to be eternally condemned, starting with myself.

He says, there are no exceptions, men or angels. Anyone who comes clothed in the name Christian, who claims to be representing Jesus Christ, if they proclaim a different gospel, they are under God's condemnation.

That's why I think verse 10 is like, it's a moment of almost comic relief, don't you think? He says, am I now seeking the favour of men or of God? I mean, is this winning any popularity for me?

No. Is it true? Yes. And I know this completely flies in the face of everything we think today. You may well be thinking, please, everybody has a right to their own conclusions.

[19 : 38] We should never tell people that they are wrong, particularly in issues of faith. That's odorous. But just think this through for a moment, because what we believe is terribly important and it has consequences for other people.

Yesterday in the National Post, Robert Fulford reviewed the latest book on Stalin, written by the former CIA chief for Soviet operations. Do you know, Stalin could not bring himself to believe that Germany would attack Russia.

He believed Hitler was his friend. And despite constant reports from his intelligence chief that an attack was coming, on the night before the attack began, he told a group of cabinet ministers, Hitler would never begin a war with the Soviets.

And you know, eventually the Russians stopped Hitler at Stalingrad. Only after 27 million Russian lives had been lost.

The issue was not what Stalin knew, but what he believed. And a wrong belief had terrible consequences for other people. Let me ask you a different question. Why did the Nazis kill millions of people in death camps?

[20 : 52] They did not set out to perform a monstrous evil. They didn't say let us do this thing so that we may be evil. They did it based on a belief. Their belief was that there are certain racial groups that are not fully human and not worthy of protection.

And if you believe that what they did was evil, that belief is not a scientific belief, it's a religious belief. When we say to the world we should stop genocide, we are saying that some beliefs are wrong and that we ought to combat false beliefs.

Genocide is always based on what you believe. And if we have warped beliefs, we will lead warped lives. But you see, this is even more important because our beliefs about the gospel do not just affect us in this life, but they determine our destiny forever.

And if the gospel is God's revealed rescue, and if it is through the gospel alone that we are saved from being eternally lost, and if Christ Jesus gave his life for our sins and God calls us through this gospel, to teach people a different gospel is not just turning away from God's salvation for yourself, it is condemning others to hell as well.

To corrupt the gospel and to teach others a distorted gospel is worse than killing people. It is killing them eternally. It is separating them from the grace of Christ and robbing them of the chance to know his call.

[22 : 25] And if anyone is doing this wicked thing, let them be accursed. I remind you that the apostle is speaking about those who are inside the church who are claiming to be Christian.

They are teaching in the name of Jesus Christ. Just think about it. The Galatians lived in a thoroughly pluralistic and tolerant culture, more than ours, actually, where tolerance and respect of other people were their bread and butter as it should be for us in our culture.

But when it comes to the church of Jesus Christ and to those who teach the gospel, there ought to be an absolute intolerance of any who would pervert and change or reverse the gospel of Christ.

Do you remember the apostle James says, let not many become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness?

And you may ask yourself, is this the spirit of Jesus Christ? I wonder if you would turn back to Mark chapter 9, just after where Nancy was reading earlier on page 43.

[23 : 35] What would Jesus say about this? What's Jesus' attitude to this? Mark 9, verse 42, on page 43. This is Jesus speaking and he says, Whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.

Little ones is Jesus' word for disciples. And so precious are we to him, he says, to put spiritual lives at risk is a very great gospel danger.

So here are two very big things for us this morning. Big gospel grace, big gospel danger. And we are here this morning because of God's grace.

And when we hear the gospel of Christ's death, we hear God calling us, just like Lazarus heard Jesus calling him. Christian. Because we can't make ourselves Christian, it's God who must call us and when he does, we must respond to him.

And the warning for us this morning is that we must not, we cannot tamper with the gospel without troubling the church, without placing ourselves and others in danger.

[24 : 56] But because of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the gospel remains for us the source of our life, the source of our unity, it's the source of our creativity and our action.

Stakes could not be higher. There's nothing more important. And I believe that to love the gospel means to oppose those who would reverse it. The way we promote the health of our church, the way we promote the growth and vitality of one another, is to love the gospel, to trust the Jesus Christ of the gospel, to promote the gospel, to contend for the gospel, and to proclaim the gospel.

Let's kneel for prayer. Amen.