

Welcome: For the last fifteen years, we have been committed to one mission as a community...*Helping People Find Their Way Back to God!* And so...this fall, we're going to be looking at our mission from two very distinct angles. We'll spend the first part of the fall in the book of Galatians, which shows us what God has done in history to bring us back to Himself. Then, we'll spend the remainder of the year looking at how Jesus calls us, as his followers, to personally join Him in *Helping People Find Their Way Back to God!*

Before the day is over...I'm going to ask you to consider doing one thing every day through the end of the year...and I believe that this one move has the ability to not only deepen your own relationship with Jesus; but to also transform your understanding of what God is able to do in the lives of your family, friends, and neighbors!

Now...as we get into Galatians, let me explain for a moment why I care so deeply about this book...

Galatians/My Story: For many years, in spite of growing up in and around the church, I experienced a great deal of anxiety and restlessness when it came to matters of God and faith! Now, when I say that I grew up around the church, here's what I mean. My dad (whom I love) was a pastor, so I was in the church every weekend, oftentimes for multiple services each weekend. During the holidays...I was on stage singing Christmas songs (which if you've heard me sing, is frightening). During the summer, I would spend entire days at work with my father. The church was like a 2nd home. In one particular congregation, there was an elderly woman who made all of the bread for the Lord's Supper! Now, at Harbor, for communion, we serve boxed Matza, which tastes pretty bland...so there's very little temptation to take an extra piece home for lunch (let's just be honest). But this woman made delicious homemade communion bread. So every time that I went to work with my dad, I went down into the kitchen, poured a large glass of Welch's grape juice, busted out the bread, and just feasted...had my own Lord's Supper multiple times a week! **How many of you can say that? See, I was far more religious than you!**

And yet, when my early twenties rolled around, I was terrified that unless I pulled together the broken and sin-filled pieces of my life and satisfied some cosmic checklist of spiritual requirements, I would never be fit to stand in God's presence!

Have you ever experienced this?

This fear of God lingered for years...until by his grace, God began to bring people into my life who encouraged and directed me back to the heart of the Scriptures. During this time, I stumbled upon *Galatians*...a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the ancient church around 55AD. So I read it...and then I read it again and again until

the message of *Galatians* began to press into my heart...and it completely wrecked me and continues to change my life to this day!

You see...all of those years I spent day after day inside the walls of a church building...and yet the truth about what God has done for me through Jesus Christ never made its way past the walls of my heart!

And the more that I spend time with people the more I realize how many share my story! They'll say something like this; *"I grew up around the church...heard about God from an early age...walked through all the sacraments, yet when it came to matters of faith and Christ, there was confusion, anxiety, and fear...not joy, peace, or freedom!"*
Maybe that's your story!

Regardless of whether you consider yourself religious or irreligious...there is a story that weaves its way through the pages of Scripture about a God who loves us far more than we ever dared imagine...even though we are far more wicked than we ever dared believe! **This is the story that the Bible calls the gospel, which literally means "Good News" ...and this Good News is at the heart of the message of Galatians!**

So, if you have your Bibles, go with me to Galatians 1...

*"This letter is from Paul, an apostle. I was not appointed by any group of people or any human authority, but by Jesus Christ himself and by God the Father, who raised Jesus from the dead. All the brothers and sisters here join me in sending this letter to the churches of Galatia. May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ **give** you grace and peace. Jesus **gave** his life for our sins, just as God our Father planned, in order to rescue us from this evil world in which we live. All **glory to God** forever and ever! Amen."* Galatians 1:1-5

Now...this is the same Paul who wrote over half of the New Testament...and we'll learn more about him in just a moment, but what I want you to notice is this... In every other letter Paul writes, he is going to move from this general introduction into a section of thanksgiving and celebration! In Ephesians, chapter one...Paul writes, *"I have not stopped thanking God for you. I pray for you constantly."* Philippians chapter one... *"Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God."* Colossians chapter one... *"We always pray for you, and we give thanks to God..."*

Yet here...in Galatians, Paul goes on to write...

"I am shocked that you are turning away so soon from God, who called you to himself through the loving mercy of Christ."

Galatians 1:6

So...we have to ask the question... *“What’s wrong with Paul? Did he wake up on the wrong side of the bed when he wrote Galatians? Is this just Paul being grumpy?”*

As you keep reading in the text, you’ll find the reason for Paul’s tone and for the entire letter of Galatians...

Look at verses 6-7!

“You are following a different way that pretends to be the Good News but is not the Good News at all. You are being fooled by those who deliberately twist the truth concerning Christ.”

Galatians 1:6-7

During this time, a group of religious leaders had worked their way into the church, and were beginning to teach a ‘pretend’ gospel...a message that looked close enough to the gospel to attract many, but was in fact an imitation.

Jesus Plus: They were essentially saying, *“Well...of course you need faith in Jesus to come back into a relationship with God, but you also need to follow the Mosaic Law...you need ritual and custom! Men, you need to be circumcised in order to be saved!”* **And this was causing massive confusion and upheaval!**

It’s similar to what happens when you go to your local **Registry of Motor Vehicles** to get a new driver’s license or license plates. So you take a number, and then wait in line for an hour before you’re called...and when you get up to the window to present your paperwork, nine times out of ten, what does the lovely person at the window tell you? **You’re missing this piece of paperwork!** And if you’re like me, you think... *“Man...I wish I would have known that before.”* And so, the next day you go through the whole process again, only to step up to the window and have the lovely person say to you once more, *“Oh...but now you’re missing this documentation.”* And I know that most of you are remarkably patient when this happens, but everything in me wants to say, *“Why didn’t you tell me that the first time! Just tell me exactly what I need to do!”* This is why there is very little joy at the RMV (just watch).

The religious leaders were essentially saying... *“If you want to walk in a relationship with God...you must first go home and fulfill all of these requirements! Then get a number, wait in line, and we’ll tell you whether or not God approves of you!”*

But Paul writes to say, *“No...you don’t need Jesus plus law! You don’t need Jesus plus custom. You don’t need Jesus plus circumcision, or Jesus plus anything. You just need Jesus!”*

This is the gospel! Galatians 1:4...

"Jesus gave his life for our sins..." Galatians 1:4

The gospel is about **Jesus!** And what **Jesus** did to rescue us from sin and death...and what God is doing in our lives to show us that we need **Jesus**...and by the time Galatians is through, we will see that the only thing we can do in response to this Good News is to acknowledge the goodness of **Jesus** and call on **Jesus** to rescue us and as we live by trusting in the finished work of **Jesus**...to love and serve **Jesus!**

And yet still, you've got people promoting an RMV spirituality saying, "Nope...you need more than Jesus!"

And I would argue that this isn't merely a dated issue that only affected the ancient church, but one that still threatens the health and vibrancy of believers and congregations today! Many of us (how we were raised or taught) whole-heartedly believe that in order to walk in a relationship with God, we need to have Jesus plus all of these other things...

Paul would say, "If that's you, you're holding a pretend gospel that lacks truth, hope, and the power to transform your life."

Let me suggest two ways this plays out today...

#1 – Jesus PLUS Beliefs and Behavior make me right with God.

In some churches, it is implicitly or explicitly taught that if you want to be saved, you must not only trust in Jesus, but also adopt the appropriate system of belief and behavior. So...of course faith is important...but equally as important are your choices of entertainment...and your iTunes playlists...and style of dress...and habits of speech...and what your doctrinal take is on predestination, and believer's baptism, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, and so on...

And even though this may sound right on the outside, when you press into that message, you'll see that it's a pretend gospel! And please hear me...I'm not suggesting that what you believe or how you live is insignificant...but simply that it's not good news at all if the only way we get into God's presence is by having a flawless system of belief and behavior!

I'll give you an example...

Kids – Much of what I do here on the weekend takes me away from my family, and we've counted the cost of that...but as a result, this means that Beth and my children

can have access to me anytime! So...if I'm talking with you afterwards, and one of my children needs something, I'll pause on our conversation to hear them. Or, if we're meeting together, and my wife needs to reach me, I'll take that call! Now...this can get funny, because occasionally I'll be in a meetings and one of my kids will call me six times in a minute, which leads me to think that the house is burning down...so I'll call them back and oftentimes I hear this on the other side of the phone... *"Hey dad...when are you going to be home?"* But that's ok...because they're my children...and they have access to me 24 hours a day. You don't have access to me 24 hours a day...they do! Furthermore, their access is not based upon whether they've had a good day or not. If one of my kids has a rough morning, and calls me to talk...I don't answer and say, better luck next time, punk! No...I'd be a terrible father. Good or bad, I'm answering the phone for my kids!

Gospel – In the same way, the gospel says that you and I have uninterrupted, 24 hours a day access to our Heavenly Father because of what Jesus has done...not because of what we've done or what we believe! Our relationship to God is based on His unlimited and undeserved love, and so He doesn't say...you do this, this, and this, and then we'll talk!

In Ephesians, chapter 2...Paul writes...

"God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it." Ephesians 2:8-9

When Paul writes that we are saved by God's grace...that word *saved* means rescued! When we were a spiritual mess, separated from God because of our sin, and we didn't even know what we believed, God showered us with his grace and kindness, and he rescued us...and there's no taking credit for this!

Later in chapter 4, Paul says...

"And because we are his dear children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, 'Abba, Father.'" Galatians 4:6

We have access to God because God, in his grace, calls us sons and daughters! There is another very popular way of thinking in our culture that goes like this!

#2 – Jesus PLUS My Best Efforts make me right with God!

Today, it's very popular to believe that it doesn't really matter what you believe as long as you are a loving and good person!

While this sounds extremely open-minded on the surface, it is actually intolerant and wrought with problems!

First...it teaches that the way to gain access to God is by being a kind, honest, and loving person! Which is wonderful if you consider yourself to be kind, honest, and loving.

But consider what this means for bad people!

The moment you say that only the good can come into God's presence, then the gospel becomes exclusive, not inclusive! And the very people who criticize Christianity for being exclusive and intolerant go on to create a system of relating to God based upon intolerance! **You have to be good...which, if we're being honest is a blow to the majority of us!**

Furthermore...this way of thinking fails to tell you how good is good enough!

Strength: If my boys are wrestling one another...they both appear fairly strong! But the moment that I walk into the room to wrestle with them...all of a sudden their strength diminishes significantly (and I'm going to keep using this illustration until that changes!). You see...they are only strong until someone much stronger walks into the room!

In the same way...we are only good until Someone who is far more kind, patient, and loving enters the room!

If all that you're doing is comparing your goodness to the people around you...you'll always be able to find someone who, in your mind, isn't as good as you are! And in your heart, you'll grow proud!

But the gospel won't let us do that! The gospel challenges us to see just how bad our sin is by bringing us face to face with the goodness of Jesus Christ. And the moment you see yourself in light of his perfect beauty and holiness, your self-righteousness and self-satisfaction will wilt away!

Paul's Story – There's no clearer place to see this than in the story of the Apostle Paul himself. Look at verse 13...

"You know what I was like when I followed the Jewish religion – how I violently persecuted God's church. I did my best to destroy it. I was far ahead of my Jews in my zeal for the traditions of my ancestors." Galatians 1:13

Paul was saying... *"Look at my life...look at my zeal for the law...look at my record! I was a Pharisee...the most moral, law-abiding, custom-keeping, theology-loving circle of religious leaders during that time! And I was at the top of my class!"*

He goes on to say, *"I was so zealous for my religion that I hated Christians and persecuted the church!"* Less than twenty years before, Paul had been responsible for the imprisonment, torture, and killing of innumerable Christians!

This is confusing...Paul seems both good and bad...so will God accept Him or not? I love the way that Paul answers this later in his ministry...

"This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners' – and I am the worst of them all. But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life."

1 Timothy 1:15-16

Do you know what Paul is saying?

I wasn't so good that I was **beyond the gospel**. But I wasn't so bad that I was **beneath the gospel**! No...when I finally came face to face with Jesus, I saw my sin in all of its filth and realized **my only hope was the gospel**!

What is the Gospel: It is simply this...

"Jesus gave his life for our sins." Galatians 1:4

That word **"for"** means **in place of**. It's saying that Jesus gave his life as a substitute in our place!

The gospel is that Jesus died and took the punishment we deserved to give us what we don't deserve...grace!

He willingly left His Father's side...and died in our place to bring us into the presence of our Heavenly Father!

Parenting – The closest thing I can find to this kind of love outside of movies or literature is parenting! Parenting is substitutionary in nature! The only way that you'll ever continue loving your children...and the only way they'll ever grow up into healthy adults, is if you constantly give them what they don't deserve! If you lay down your rights and time and energy for their good...even when they're ungrateful! In a sense...you have to die so they can live!

Even this falls far short...but it's a shadow of grace! God gave everything to give you everything!

When this good news makes its way into your heart, it will wreck you! Some of you have believed for your entire life that you need belief and behavior to get into God's presence! And there's fear instead of freedom in your heart! There's dread instead of joy because you know you can't do it! **The grace of Jesus Christ is the only thing that can spring your heart from the prison of fear!**

Some of you have believed for your whole life that as long as you're good, you'll get into God's presence, but you're holding on to a pretend gospel! It's hollow! And while you try to maintain an appearance to prove to God and others that you're good...you'll become exhausted! You'll wear out! **Only the grace of Jesus Christ can spring your heart from the prison of self-effort and self-righteousness.**

The gospel of grace is that we are more wicked than we dared believe, but more loved and accepted in Christ than we dared imagine!

Do you believe that? Have you bowed your knee to Christ and thrown yourself on His grace? Have you confessed to Jesus, "I'm the worst of sinners," and asked Him to accept you on the basis of your goodness! If not, today can be that day!

Application:

As we close today...I want to ask you to do two things!

1. Read through Galatians...

At a chapter a week, you can read through the book in six weeks! At a chapter a day, you can read through Galatians six times during this series. Galatians changed me when I read it cover to cover almost every week for over a year!

The gospel is not something we hear and respond to one time...but as we'll see, we live and grow in the gospel!

2. Help One

Our mission is *To Help People Find Their Way Back to God*. But it's just a statement on a wall unless it gets into our hearts.

This fall, I want to encourage you to ask God every day to give you one person to show the love of Christ to. Pray for that person...that God would

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shower them with His grace and the gospel would come to life in their hearts!h

When you begin helping one by praying for them...and loving them in practical ways...you will come to see what God is able to do in and through you in the lives of the people you love!

Never underestimate the power of a simple invitation!

Help One!

Pray!