

## What the Gospel Isn't

Galatians 1:6-10

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

*Behold, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord who minister by night in the house of the Lord. Lift up your hands to the sanctuary and bless the Lord. May the Lord bless you from Zion, He who fills heaven and earth.*

Now turn with me if you would to Galatians, Paul's epistle to the Galatians, and we're going to read together the first ten verses. Galatians chapter 1 and beginning in the first verse. Before we do so, let's look to God in prayer.

*Lord our God, we thank You for amazing grace that sought us and bought us and brought us into the fold of God. We thank You tonight for an assurance that Your Spirit witnesses with our spirits that we are the children of God, and if children, heirs, heirs of God and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ. Lord, as we read the Scriptures we need Your help to read it aright, to understand what it says. We need the illumination of Your Spirit in our minds and we pray now for Your blessing. Help us to read and mark and learn and inwardly digest and all for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

This is God's holy and inerrant Word:

Paul, an apostle — not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead — and all the brothers who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

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, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the Gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.

As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

For 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.

Amen. May God add His blessing to that reading of His Word.

Now, as Ligon has just announced to you, we start this evening a series that will take us through the month of August. Twelve studies on the Gospel, a series that I'm calling "The Gospel Centered Life." I've been mulling over and thinking over this topic for thirty-nine years, but it was at the Together for the Gospel conference a couple of months ago that certain things solidified in my mind and more particularly in my heart.

### **What is the Gospel?**

John Bunyan tells in *Pilgrim's Progress*. He tells of two men, Formalist and Hypocrisy. They jump over a wall as Christian is making his way along the Narrow Path, having entered through the Straight Gate. At a certain point in the journey, Formalist and Hypocrisy jump over the wall and join him. Bunyan gives us a little clue about the nature of these two men. They come from the city of Vain Glory — reader beware. They have made what they call, a "short cut." I do it all the time and get into trouble for it all the time. To get from my office to where my mail is put at the seminary, I cross some grass and I'm supposed to walk on the concrete but it's quicker just to take that little shortcut. "If we made it onto the path," Formalist and Hypocrisy say to Christian, "If we made it onto the path, what's it matter which way we got in?" Bunyan is telling you something, that there are those who think they are on the path, there are those who think they are following the Gospel way, who understand the Gospel, who follow the Gospel, who believe the Gospel, but they have come in by some other way and they will not go to heaven.

In a similar way, Paul is addressing the Galatians because in the church at Galatia there were Gospel tamperists, folk, certain people who wanted to "adjust" the Gospel that Paul had preached. They wanted to add certain things to the Gospel that Paul had preached. They wanted to make the Gospel stricter and more defined and more rigid, insisting on adding certain things to the Gospel.

It's more than likely that this is Paul's very first letter. Now I won't bore you with all the details. I'll just give you my own conclusion. I think Galatians was written before the Jerusalem council in Acts 15. If it was written after the Jerusalem council in Acts 15, I cannot begin to understand why Paul did not simply cite Acts 15 and have done, with it because the issues that are raised in Galatians are the

same issues that were raised in the Jerusalem council and the letter seems to show no cognizance of the Jerusalem council, which makes me think that this letter was written before that. Now that's a PhD dissertation for hundreds of people in about thirty seconds! The Jerusalem council was around 48, possibly 49 AD, which means this letter was written 47-48 AD and Paul had ministered on his mission trip to southern Galatia at the beginning of possibly 47.

In other words, this letter is written perhaps within a year, perhaps less than a year, of the time that Paul had preached and taught and evangelized in southern Galatia and had seen God pour out His Spirit and bring dozens, hundreds, to know and love and profess their faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But within less than a year, folks, in less than a year something has gone radically wrong. Certain people have come in, and look at the language he uses in chapter 5 and verse 4 — “You are severed from Christ. You who would be justified by the law, you have fallen away from grace.” What he's saying is there are certain people who are teaching a gospel that is no longer a gospel that is wholly and utterly dependent upon grace. It is a gospel now of “grace plus” — plus this, plus that, plus specifically circumcision, plus food laws, plus Jewish Sabbath laws. You notice in verse 6 he calls it “a different gospel”, and then in verse 7 he qualifies that and says no, it's not really a different gospel, because there cannot be a different gospel because there is only one Gospel, not that there is another one. It sounds like another gospel and they're purporting to preach the gospel but it is not the Gospel.

So I ask again, what is the Gospel? Don Carson, whose words at this point in the history of the church seem almost prophetic on so many issues, he is so incredibly insightful on biblical themes and deviations from biblical themes. He says whenever he asks the question, “What is the Gospel?” it is certain to light a fuse. And as soon as he asks the question all kinds of disparate answers are going to be given from within evangelicalism. “It's terribly alarming,” he says. Ligon and his other three of the four musketeers — Al Mohler and Mark Dever and C.J. Mahaney, and the Together for the Gospel — this brotherhood of friends have been formed for this purpose, to define and maintain and keep in focus for the likes of you and me this question — What is the Gospel?

## **I. It is possible to deviate from the Gospel.**

Now the first thing I want to say is this tonight — that it is possible to deviate from the Gospel. It is possible for churches in southern Galatia, within twelve months of hearing the apostle Paul preach the Gospel, to deviate from that Gospel. And folks, it is more than possible for the likes of you and me at First Presbyterian Church to deviate from the Gospel. Look at verse 6. Look at the language the apostle uses here. You know, there's no thanksgiving here. There's a customary sort of introduction and a gracious word in the opening verses, but then in verse

6 it's young Paul. It's like young Spurgeon. When you read young Spurgeon he is like a firebrand. And this is young Paul and he's saying, "I'm astonished that you are so quickly" — and look at that verb — "deserting." Deserting.

Some of you have been in the forces, the armed forces. You know how sensitive that word desertion is. There was a member, a distant member of my family, there were rumors when I was growing up he had deserted during a battle in the Second World War. Our family just never liked to talk about it. There was a sense of shame hanging over him because of the fact that he was a deserter. He had deserted the cause. Paul is saying to these Galatians, "Some of you are deserting God! You are deserting the Gospel! You are deserting the grace of Christ! You are falling away from grace!"

Do you remember Paul's last letter at the end of his life, just before he is executed? Second Timothy, writing to his son and friend Timothy, urging him to be faithful, to endure hardships like a good soldier of Jesus Christ. And you remember how he begins that epistle? That God had made him a herald of the Gospel and that he was not ashamed because he knew in whom he believed. Paul loved the Gospel but he was persuaded that in Galatia, within a year of his preaching, some would deserting the Gospel. They were deserting the Gospel. They were deserting the grace that is in Jesus Christ.

I became acquainted with the Gospel thirty-nine years ago on December 28 in 1971 at around 11 o'clock at night. It's one of those moments that will never go away for me. It was a darkness and then light moment. I'd never heard the Gospel before. I could not have told you what was in the Bible. I could not have told you the book of Genesis was in the Bible let alone the first book of the Bible. I'd never read it. I didn't possess a copy of it. And in those thirty-nine years there have been times when I have been tempted to legalism, in the biblical definition of that term. There have been times when I have been tempted to formalism as a way to please God. So long as I keep the forms, so long as I keep the outward structure, so long as the framework is there, everything is okay. There have been times in those thirty-nine years when so long as I maintained the ritual, as long as you go through the motions, everything was okay. There have been times in those thirty-nine years when I think my eyes have been taken off the Gospel to focus somewhere else.

A woman goes into a pet store on a Monday morning and she buys a parrot, takes it home. Tuesday morning she's back in the pet store and she says to the pet store owner, "He doesn't talk." And the pet store owner says, "He needs a ladder." So she buys a ladder. Wednesday morning she's back again. "He's not talking." The pet store owner says, "He needs a bell," so she buys a bell. Thursday morning she's back again. "Not at word." "He needs a mirror." She buys a mirror. Friday morning she's back again. "Still not talking." "He needs a plastic parrot for company." She buys one. Store's closed at the weekend. Monday morning she comes in and she's sad and forlorn. She says to the pet

store owner, “The parrot's dead.” “Did he speak?” he says to her. “Yes, just before he died. — Does that pet store not sell food?” (laughter) Without the Gospel friends, we die. Without the Gospel we die. Jerry Bridges says, “The Gospel is not only the most important message in history, it is the only essential message in history.”

## **II. There is a tendency to say that the Gospel is not enough.**

The second thing I want to say tonight is this — there's a tendency to say the Gospel is not enough. The Gospel is not enough. Now in Galatia, and we don't have time to go into all of the details of it tonight, and we'll look at these as we go along in these coming weeks, but if you look at chapter 2 and verse 16, let's get into a little bit of what the Galatians were up to.

“Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law because by works of the law no one will be justified.”

Now what are these works of the law? There were people in Galatia who said it wasn't wrong to believe in Jesus, you can believe in Jesus and that's fine, that's good, that's wonderful, that's actually necessary. You need to believe in Jesus but you need to do something *in addition* to believing in Jesus to be justified. You need to be circumcised. Jewish Christians, Judaizers in Galatia, especially with regard to Gentile converts were saying it's all very well for these Gentiles now to be coming into the church. But it's not enough for them simply be believe in Jesus. They need to be circumcised. They need to obey the food laws.

You remember the encounter Paul talks about here in Galatia with Peter in Antioch? You remember when the church moved from Jerusalem up to Antioch there were lots of Gentiles, Gentile converts in the church in Antioch, and Peter was fine with it, he was happy with it, he was perfectly content to sit down and eat pork sandwiches with Gentile converts at lunch until the heavyweights from Jerusalem, the Jewish heavyweights — James and the other brothers came up from Jerusalem. And all of a sudden Peter refuses to eat with the Gentiles. He separates from them and he just eats now with his Jewish buddies in Antioch. And Paul is incensed. If there's one moment in history where I'd like to go back and just eavesdrop the conversation, the encounter between Paul and Peter in Antioch and just see them staring one at the other and Paul facing him down and saying to Peter, “What you are doing is a denial of the Gospel!” It's a denial of the Gospel. He withstood him to his face because Peter outwardly, if not inwardly, outwardly Peter was giving his consent to those who were saying it is not enough to believe on Jesus. You need to add something else. The Gospel is not enough.

## What is the Gospel?

God will forgive your sin if you believe in Him. Is that the Gospel? Is that an adequate statement of the Gospel? God will forgive your sin if you believe in Him. There's no mention of Jesus in that statement. There's no mention of the cross. There's no mention of a dozen other things in that statement. God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. Is that the Gospel? You can enjoy your best life now. All you have to do is realize who you are. You can make it religious. All you have to do is realize what God has made you, what God can make of you, and you can have your best life now. Is that the Gospel?

I asked some students in my class four or five years ago, "What is the Gospel?" One student said, "Jesus is Lord." I had to compose myself. It's a very trendy thing to say today in certain quarters. The Gospel is Jesus is Lord. It's a perfectly orthodox statement. Jesus *is* Lord.

Now I want to ask you, my friends, what does the word Gospel actually mean? It means "good news." It means "good news." Is it "Good News" on the Day of Judgment to hear "Jesus is Lord" if I'm still in my sins? That is the most terrifying thing that you will ever hear. The statement in and of itself, Jesus is Lord, is not good news. It's not good news to me as a sinner. It's not good news to me who must bear the weight of the guilt of my sins.

The Gospel is the great narrative. You know - creation, fall, redemption, consummation. That's what you need to understand, that this whole universe, this whole history, it's all part of that great plan so we can have hope that this world is going to get better. That's the Gospel. God is going to save the world. There's going to be peace and justice because creation, fall, redemption, consummation — is that the Gospel?

The Gospel is the kingdom has come. The kingdom has dawned, the eschatological, the future kingdom has burst into the now so it gives us hope for the future, for peace and justice and reconciliation and poverty. Is that the Gospel? Or our emergent friends who are saying things like, "You know, what you need to do is to be Jesus in the community not talk about him, just be Jesus in the community. That's the Gospel."

What about covenant membership? Did you see those little boys and girls? They're beautiful little boys and girls. They're charming. I wish I had boys and girls just like that. And we give them the sign of baptism. But my friends listen — baptism is not a sign that those boys and girls are regenerate. It is a sign to faith and not of faith. These little boys and girls must believe. They must trust in Jesus Christ. They must repent of their sins. And God has surrounded them with many, many promises, but the promise in and of itself will not save them. The Gospel is not "I'm a child of the covenant." You can be a child of the covenant and go to hell. Do you understand that? Judas was a child of the covenant. In my opinion,

Saul was a child of the covenant, King Saul. And you know over these past few months the answer to the question, “Did Saul go to heaven?” in my opinion no, he did not. You can be a child of the covenant and go to hell.

I'm a professor by day. That's my day job, so forgive me, it's summer. I'm going to give you homework and you've all got to do it, every single one of you — including you, Ligon. By next week — and those of you that are going to Peru on the mission trip, you have to do it too — in fifty words or less on a piece of paper, “What is the Gospel?” by next week. “What is the Gospel?” Some of you think that's going to be an easy assignment. I'm going to tell you now it is not. And the harder that assignment is the more it will corroborate the justification of this series. Do you think if I got all the elders together, do you think if I got all the elders together and asked them one by one, “What is the Gospel?” that we'd have a unanimous, consenting answer? This is First Presbyterian Church, folks. We believe the Gospel here. We bring our Bibles to church here. Fifty words or less by next Sunday evening — every one of you. Boys, boys and girls, I want you to do it too — what is — get your parents to help you, only try and do it by yourself to begin with — “What is the Gospel?”

Why is this important? Well turn back to Galatians. Look at what Paul says at the end of verse 8 and again at the end of verse 9. “If anyone” — no, no, no, no, no — not just anyone. How many of you have seen an angel? Right, nobody put their hands up because that's going to make you look silly. You may have seen an angel unawares, the Bible says. How many of you have seen Michael? I am — can I say this? — I am really looking forward to seeing Michael and Gabriel. I want to know, did the medieval painters get him right — probably not. Paul says if Gabriel himself came down and preached another Gospel, the curse of God come upon him. How important is this? Life and death hangs in the answer to this question, not just generically folks, our own life and death, our own life and death.

### **What are we trusting in the last gasping breaths of this life?**

Do you lack joy sometimes, I mean real joy? It's probably because we don't fully appreciate the Gospel. Are you growing spiritually into maturity? If not, it's probably because we don't appreciate the Gospel. Are you always motivated by guilt? Then it's probably because we don't fully appreciate the Gospel. And over these next summer, warm, hot, summer evenings, I want us not just to bathe in the Gospel, I want us to have one of those, one of those — you either like a bath or you don't and my wife does not. She prefers a shower, but just go with me for a minute. Will you just relax in this luxurious, warm, soapy water and you just almost go off to sleep? That's what I want to do over the next few weeks, but don't forget your assignment — fifty words or less by next Sunday evening. Let's pray.

*Father, we are embarking upon a really, really important journey because we don't want to reach the end of this journey and get it wrong. Confirm us in the Bible, in Your holy, inerrant Word, the nature of the Gospel and then let us just cast ourselves entirely upon it, for very life itself, eternal life itself, for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction. Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

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