II. The One and Only Gospel

September 14/15, 2011 Galatians 1:1-10

Aim: To defend the truth of the gospel against all false gospels and to realize the seriousness of heresy and error in the church.

A. The One Gospel (Gal. 1:1-5)
The epistle to the Galatians can be summarized by one simple question: what is the gospel? What is the real gospel, as opposed to false gospels or (to use Paul’s own terminology) perverted gospels? Who is Paul? What is the gospel? The salutation anticipates both questions.

Paul began each of his letters according to the letter writing form of his day. He begins with a description of himself, next he mentions those to whom he is writing, and finally he declares a blessing for them. If we look carefully at the salutations, we will discover that in each case he personalizes the salutation to fit the needs of the church and to lay the foundation for what he intends to write. Thus, the greeting contains, in seed form, the apostle’s mental preoccupations as he sets out to write to a particular church with its particular needs. This is especially true of verse 3-5.

One way to deny the truthfulness of a message is to deny the authority of the one who gives it. The Galatian church had received the true gospel of grace from Paul and had believed it until some false teachers came in after he was gone. They not only attacked the validity of the message but also that of the messenger. Apparently the Judaizers had convinced some of the Galatian church members that Paul was a self-appointed apostle with no divine commission. So at the outset of the letter Paul dispensed with the usual personal greetings and immediately began to establish the genuineness of his apostolic authority, which he later (1:11-2:21) expands on in detail. In this brief salutation Paul summarizes his authority, his message, and his motive.

1. Greeting (1:1-2)
   a) From Paul (1:1-2a)
   *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 brethren who are with me...*

   (1) Credentials (1:1)

   (a) Apostle
   The author’s name comes first, as was customary in ancient letters, and then his name is followed immediately by his credentials. In the Greek original, Paul’s words are terse: ‘Paul, apostle, not.’ The reason Paul was upset was that enemies were trying to undermine his authority.

   Paul begins by highlighting the uniqueness of his call as an ‘apostle.’ To tackle issues as important as the understanding of the gospel, Paul needs to defend his credentials. There were some who doubted his authority to speak on such important matters, since he was not ‘one of the twelve.’ He was a latecomer, they claimed, who had not been commissioned directly by Christ Himself. Therefore, he was only a second-rate apostle—his gospel was just hearsay. If this is
what people were saying about Paul, it is easy to see why he dispensed with the customary pleasantries and started his letter by defending his credentials. He understood his opponents were making a personal attack in order to advance a theological error. They were devaluing Paul to disparage the gospel. What was at stake, therefore, was not simply Paul’s reputation, but our salvation. Paul was not defending himself so much as he was defending the independence of his apostleship in order to defend the gospel.

And what is so significant about an apostle? This: that it was an office instituted directly by God rather than men. Teachers often arrived in the cities of the ancient world with letters of recommendation from a notable dignitary or recognized authority. Paul claims divine approval for his role among the Galatians.

The term ‘apostle’ means ‘sent one’ or ‘messenger.’ The New Testament uses this word in both a general and a specific sense. In the general sense, a man like Epaphroditus is called a ‘messenger’ (apostoloi literally ‘apostle,’ Phil. 2:25; cp. 2 Cor. 8:23). The general sense of ‘apostle’ is also used of Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Silas and Timothy (1 Th. 1:1; 2:6), and other outstanding leaders (Rom. 16:7). In the sense that Paul uses ‘apostle,’ the term is reserved for those individuals who had both seen, and received a commission from, the risen Christ (cp. Acts 1:22). An apostle was an envoy, ambassador, or messenger who was chosen and trained by Jesus Christ as His special emissary for proclaiming His truth during the formative years of the church. It is the resurrected Christ who set Paul apart as an apostle.

The apostles were the spokesmen for the Lord Jesus Christ; those through whom Christ revealed His will to the church; those who by inspiration wrote much of the New Testament. The apostles – and others such as Luke and Mark who wrote under their authority – wrote with Christ’s authority. Therefore, Paul uses this title to demonstrate his divine authority to write scripture.

(b) Call

Paul expands his title by giving an elaborate description of his call. False teachers were claiming that Paul was not a true apostle. Therefore, as he begins his letter, he must carefully defend his apostolic office. He expands on his call both negatively and positively. First, he asserts that his call is not from men. A true minister does not thrust himself into the office; he does not run without being sent. God alone calls into the ministry. And so Paul’s first negation applies to all ministers as well as apostles. Second, Paul expands his negative remarks with respect to his call in such a way that applies exclusively to apostles: ‘nor through the agency of man.’ In other words, his call was of a supernatural origin; no human means of any sort was involved in his apostolic commissioning. The truth is that Paul was not sent from men. His apostolic commission did not come, for example from the church at Antioch. Nor was he sent by a man, as if his call had come through someone like Barnabas or Peter.

The second part of the negation leads to the positive assertion that his call was ‘through Jesus Christ ….’ Here Paul asserts the supernatural origin of his call. Jesus called Paul and set him apart before he had contact with any of the other apostles. Paul’s authority was not man-given or self-given but God-given, and his right to instruct the Galatians was grounded in that divine prerogative. At the beginning of his letter to the Galatians, which was his earliest letter, Paul explains where his Christianity came from. It came straight from the mouth of Christ. Therefore, Paul’s message is God’s own message about salvation from sin. Anyone who sets aside his apostolic teaching sets aside the gospel truth of Jesus Christ.
Galatians – Lesson 2

Paul joins the Father and the Son grammatically; both the Son and the Father are the objects of the one preposition ‘from’ (cp. v. 3). By combining them in this manner, he expresses the unity of the divine Godhead; he asserts that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, equal with the Father. Observe as well the contrast between the agency of man and the agency of Christ Jesus. If Paul was not called through the agency of man, but through the Christ Jesus, then Jesus Christ is not merely a man; He is the God-man. By these simply expressions, Paul lays the foundation for the doctrine of the Trinity: these divine persons are the same in substance, equal in power and glory.

(c) Gospel

Why would Paul start with the resurrection in his credentials? He does not mention the crucifixion again until verse 4, so he seems to be taking things out of their chronological sequence. The reason Paul does this may have to do with his autobiography. When he first came to Christ, He did not meet Him at the cross. Rather, his calling as a Christian and his commission as an apostle began with his encounter with the risen Christ. So in Galatians, where Paul has to defend both his own apostolic authority and the truth of his gospel message, he quite naturally begins with Christ and His resurrection.

Further, notice how Paul emphasizes the resurrection of Christ. An apostle must have been an eyewitness of the resurrection of Christ (Acts 1:22). Although he was not a disciple during Christ’s earthly ministry, Paul could bear witness to the fact of the resurrection because he had been called to be an apostle by the risen Christ when He appeared to Paul in resurrection glory on the road to Damascus. Hence Paul asserts that he was as uniquely an apostle as the twelve, since his call came directly from God. In fact, Paul certainly had a vastly superior commissioning to any of the false-teaching, self-appointed Judaizers who were confusing the Galatians and trying to set themselves above his authority.

(2) Colleagues (1:2a)

Paul further demonstrates the unique nature of his office by contrasting himself with fellow pastors. He includes them in the greeting in verse 2. Paul consciously distinguishes himself with respect to office. Although he treated them as co-workers, they did not share in his apostolic authority.

Who are these ‘brothers’? The short answer is, we don’t know! But it is very interesting (and perhaps telling) that Barnabas is not one of them – at least, Paul does not mention him by name. Since Barnabas had been with Paul whenever the gospel had first been preached in Galatia (Acts 13:43, 46, 50; 14:12, 20), it would have made sense for Paul to mention him now. But a rift had developed between Paul and Barnabas (and Peter!) over meal practices whenever Gentiles were present. Barnabas was greatly loved and admired and it would have helped Paul enormously to have mentioned him here, particularly since he is desirous of their allegiance to what he was about to say. But Barnabas, too, has done something to compromise the gospel, and Paul can only make mention of ‘brothers’.

Therefore, with a few strokes of a pen, Paul asserts his apostolic authority. Because of this authority, we are studying the book of Galatians almost two thousand years later.
b) To the Churches of Galatia (1:2b)

... To the churches of Galatia:
The recipients of this letter where ‘the churches of Galatia.’ Galatia is a region, not a place. Paul is writing to churches located in Antioch, Lystra, Derbe, and Iconium. Paul founded these churches on his first missionary journey with Barnabas just over a year before the writing of this epistle.

Note that although he addresses them in the plural, ‘the churches of Galatia,’ he writes to them as a unit and deals with them as one church. The Greek word *ecclesia* translates a Hebrew verb meaning ‘to call.’ The church has been separated from the world into a grouping with a particular identity and calling. The New Testament often uses the word *ecclesia* to describe the church located in a geographical area, which some call the regional church (e.g., 1:13; cp. Acts 9:31; Eph. 4:3-6). This language reminds us of one of the biblical foundations stones for the Presbyterian system of church government; namely, the Bible uses the term ‘church’ for both an individual congregation and for a collection of congregations.

Paul’s manner of addressing the churches in Galatia alerts them and us to the urgency with which he wrote. In almost every other salutation, whether he was writing to a church or to an individual, Paul added certain specific details that personally distinguished the recipient. Yet with respect to the Galatians, he simply writes ‘to the churches of Galatia.’ He does not address the Galatians with any word of endearment. Why does Paul alter his style in this one instance? His abruptness expresses the urgency of the letter and the great danger facing the congregation. His resentment of their defection from the gospel of grace forced him to dispense with any commendation or personal remarks, and he simply gave a gospel greeting before he rebuked them.

The sense of urgency is further expressed by the absence of any prayer or word of commendation. In his letters to all the other churches, after the words of blessing, Paul would either express thanksgiving, a word of commendation or comfort, or a prayer. However, to the Galatian congregations, after the words of blessing, he immediately issues a warning (v. 6). The very manner in which Paul addresses the Galatians is a blaring siren and a flashing red light. Paul is shouting with his pen, ‘Look out! You are in great danger.’ The Galatian Church was in serious peril.

This church that was in danger of losing the gospel was founded by the apostle Paul. He was their first teacher. How can it be that an apostolic church could fall so quickly? This defection reminds us of the subtle ways of Satan and it alerts us to be watchful (cp. Acts 20:29-30). We must always be on our guard.

2. Gospel (1:3-5)
The question, ‘What is the gospel?’ can be rephrase: ‘Under which covenant do believers in Christ find themselves?’ As Paul proceeds through his epistle, he equates the gospel of Christ with the new covenant of promise. The old covenant of works and the new covenant are as night and day. They are totally at variance (see 4:29). They cannot be merged or blended into a twilight gospel. Yet this is exactly what was being attempted by those who troubled the Galatian churches.
Galatians – Lesson 2

a) Benefits (1:3a)

Grace to you and peace...

These two terms, grace and peace, summarize the great provisions and benefits of the gospel. Grace is God’s attribute of benevolence and kindness by which He sows favor to some sinners who deserve damnation, and delivers them from their sins. It is His love for the unworthy. Flowing from God’s gracious character are His gracious acts on behalf of His people. It is the grace of God that regenerates them, justifies them, adopts them, and sanctifies them.

In the gospel, the grace of God is accompanied with the declaration of God’s peace. It evokes the Hebrew \textit{shalom}, physical and spiritual well-being. This peace is an objective peace. For Paul, it relates to what is experienced when the fundamental relationship of alienation between man and God has been rectified through the cross and regeneration. Christians were once God’s enemies, and He looked upon them with a just wrath. Now God’s wrath is turned away and He is reconciled to them. In this objective act of reconciliation, God first enables them to turn to Him in repentance, faith, and love, and then accepts them as His children.

Therefore, these two words, grace and peace, summarize the benefits of the gospel. In pronouncing grace and peace, Paul states that God is communicating these things to His people.

b) Source (1:3b)

...from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ...

Paul connects under the one preposition ‘from’ the first and second Persons of the Godhead and in joining the two names together he shows the full certainty of the declaration of grace and peace. It comes from God, who is reconciled to us as Father and who bestows this blessing upon us and it comes to us on the basis of the mediatorial work of Christ. The title ‘Christ’ teaches that our Savior was anointed by God as our prophet, priest, and king. The personal name ‘Jesus’ reminds us that He is the God-man who alone can save us (Mt. 1:21). The title ‘Lord’ (\textit{kurios}) was the word employed in the Septuagint for the divine name of God; it establishes that He is Jehovah God.

c) Content (1:4)

...who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father...

In turning from grace to a legalistic system of salvation by works, the Galatians had ignored the significance of the death of Christ. Salvation, purposes for His people by God, has been purchased for them by Christ. Paul is teaching the doctrine of substitutionary atonement and reminds his readers that the Lord Jesus Christ became their substitute. This verse teaches four important things about the cross of Christ.

(1) Willingness of Christ

First, it shows the \textit{willingness} of Jesus to go to the cross. The crucifixion was a voluntary self-sacrifice—He ‘gave Himself’ (cp. Eph. 5:25; Titus 2:14). The heart of the gospel is Christ’s willing sacrifice of Himself for our sins. In other words, grace and peace are ours because Christ offered Himself up as a sacrifice. This emphasis upon the perfect, finished, and unrepeatable work of Christ in purging the sins of His people sets the true gospel apart from all imitations.
Christ did not die merely to make salvation possible. He died to *obtain* eternal redemption for those whom He would, in course of time, call to Himself through the gospel preached to every creature.

(2) **Purpose of the Cross**

Second, this verse shows the *purpose* of the cross. The reason Christ gave Himself away was ‘for our sins.’ A transaction took place on the cross. We were the ones who deserved to die because we owe God an infinite debt for our sin. But Christ took our place on the cross. He became our substitute, our sin-offering. We learn from this substitutionary atonement how impossible it is to pay for our own sins. Full atonement requires nothing less than the blood of Jesus Christ, the very God.

(3) **Effect of the Cross**

Third, this verse shows the *effect* of the cross. Christ was crucified ‘to deliver us from the present evil age.’ When we think of the cross, we usually think first of the atonement. Christ died to pay for our sins. But Christ was also crucified to emancipate us from this evil age. The gospel is a rescue, like being released from servitude or freed from prison.

‘Age’ (*aiōn*) does not refer to a period of time but to a passing, transitory system, in this case the evil, satanic world system that has dominated the world since the Fall and will continue to dominate it until the Lord’s return.

The Bible speaks of two ages: the present age that stretches from the fall of Adam to the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the age to come when God’s people shall live with Him in the glorified eternal state. The present age is an evil age. This age is under the prince of darkness and we are in it in the bondage of our sins, the lust of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, children of wrath. But Christ, by His perfect sacrifice, has delivered His people from this evil age. He makes them sons and daughters of God. Christ in His perfect work has delivered them not only from the guilt and curse of sin, but also from the bondage and dominion of sin. God saved His peopled not simply to rescue them from hell, but also to conform them to the image of Jesus Christ. The gospel has in view not only our personal regeneration and conversion, but also our ultimate glorification.

Christ’s death and resurrection do more than atone for our sins. They redeem (buy back) His elect people from their lost estate and transform their status. The word ‘deliver’ or ‘rescue’ (*exaireō*) is a very strong word. It carries the idea of rescuing from danger and means to rescue from bondage and slavery (cp. Acts 7:10, 34). It implies that Christ is a strong Savior, who has done everything to deliver His people from the clutches of Satan and the power of his dominion. Yet their deliverance, although complete, is not fully realized in this life.

(4) **Origin of the Cross**

Fourth, this verse shows the *origin* of the cross. Christ died ‘according to the will of our God and Father. The execution of Jesus of Nazareth was not an unforeseen tragedy, a mere accident of history; it was part of God’s plan for the salvation of sinners. The cross had been in God’s mind from all eternity. Thus it demonstrates the love of God as well as the love of Christ. The Father does not love us because the Son died for us. Rather the Son died for us because the Father loves us. The cross had its origin in our Father’s heart.
At the end of verse 4 Paul joins the sovereign, loving, compassionate, gracious will of God the Father to the work of Christ. Paul reminds us that Christ has acted according to the eternal will of the Father. In other words, God has eternally planned our salvation and is sovereign in the salvation of sinners. Perhaps Paul mentioned God’s unified plan of salvation to demonstrate that the Judaizers were wrong when they taught that the Jews were saved in any other way than by the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

d) Purpose (1:5)
…to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Paul concludes the salutation with a doxology fitting for such a saving God. He does so by pointing to the purpose of the gospel – the glory of God. The whole redemptive process has only one object, namely that God might be glorified. The authentic gospel exalts Christ, not ourselves. ‘Glory’ is another Old Testament word. Its root meaning is to be heavy – it conveys the idea of weight, worth, significance, splendor, and dignity. This phrase is so typical of Paul. He cannot write about salvation without praising God (cp. Eph. 1:3). Paul states the important truth that it was God’s purpose, from all eternity, to save a people by sovereign grace, so that He might be glorified in them (cp. Eph. 1:6; Rom. 11:36).

The crucifixion and the resurrection, the cross and the empty tomb—these are the simple facts of the gospel. These facts do not contain a single word about anything we do. They simply document what God has done in human history through Jesus Christ. The gospel is not about what we do for God; it is about what God has done for us. Together the Father and the Son accomplished our salvation through the cross; together they announce it to the world through the teaching of the apostles; and together they apply it to our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, all the glory goes to God, which is precisely how Paul ends the beginning of his letter. If salvation is God’s work from beginning to end, then all the honor and majesty belong to Him forever.

The Galatians needed to be reminded of this truth, because the system of the Judaizers promoted self-congratulation. The ultimate purpose of the gospel is that saved sinners should give all glory and honor to the triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The desire for God’s glory is the fountain of all true obedience.

**B. The Only Gospel (Gal. 1:6-10)**

The book of Galatians is Paul’s only epistle in which he has no word of commendation for those to whom he writes. After his brief salutation he immediately launches into the reason for his writing: his extreme concern and perplexity about the false teachers who were undercutting the gospel of grace he had so carefully preached and expounded while he ministered in Galatia. He was deeply grieved that the truth of God’s sovereign and gracious offer of redemption through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ alone was being corrupted by the teachings of salvation by works, namely, that a Gentile had to become a Jew surgically and ceremonially before he could become a Christian and that all Christians had to obey and honor the Jewish law and traditions in order to obtain and maintain righteousness from the Lord.

In this section, Paul shows the serious danger of defecting from the true gospel by exchanging it for a counterfeit gospel. Paul is not speaking about all the Galatians, just a few of them – preachers who were preaching a different gospel, to be precise. But even so, he is accusing the Galatians collectively of desertion from the pure gospel which he had preached among them.
Paul regards the Galatians as real Christians, in spite of the strictures which follow in verses 6-9. He writes to those who are genuine believers, not apostates. They are falling into error, however, and Paul is deeply concerned, even angry. His condemnation is reserved, not so much for the Galatians themselves, as for those who were leading them astray (v. 7). He writes with untypical ferocity. There is no other gospel, he declares, but that which he had preached to them.

1. A Different Gospel (1:6-7)

   a) A Counterfeit Gospel (1:6-7a)

   *I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another...*

   In verse 6, Paul abruptly addresses the problem. Normally at this point in his letters, Paul expressed thanksgiving for or offered a prayer on behalf of his readers. Even the Corinthians, for all their immorality, received Paul’s lavish praise. But he barely gave the Galatians his common courtesy. After the doxology in verse 5, we might have expected a blessing. What Paul gives instead is a curse.

   Therefore his abruptness should alert us to his concern over the pernicious error with which he is dealing as he writes to the churches of Galatia. He was astonished that they are willing to substitute a counterfeit gospel for the true one. He was ‘amazed’ (thaumazō, a strong word meaning to be astounded) and bewildered. He was gob-smacked. He was astonished. He was shocked and outraged. Thus the body of the letter seethes with righteous indignation.

   *Tacheōs* (‘quickly’) can mean either easily and readily or soon, and sometimes both. The believers apparently offered little and ineffective resistance to the false teachers, quickly and easily coming under the influence of heretical doctrines. Whatever the exact date of this letter, Paul regards it as unnervingly soon after his visit there. As soon as he left, the Judaizers came. In no time at all, the church was giving up the gospel. Error takes hold with alarming speed. No sooner had Paul left them than some had begun to question the truth of what he had said. This is a reminder how easy it is to fall away unless we are kept safe by God’s grace. Constant vigilance is needed in maintaining the truth of the gospel.

   The word ‘deserting’ (metatithēmi) expresses the treachery of a traitor or military desertion, which was punishable by death during time of war. Later the word came to be used to describe anyone who converted from one religion or philosophy to another. The Galatians were betraying their allegiance to Jesus Christ and going over to the other side. The fact that the verb occurs here in the present tense is significant. It describes something the Galatians were in the process of doing at that very moment. But they had not done it yet, so there was still a chance to stop them. The Greek verb is reflexive, indicating that the act is voluntary. The believers were not passively being removed, but were in the process of removing themselves from the sphere of grace. Like a soldier who deserts his regiment, the Galatians were in the process of turning aside from the true gospel to take hold of a counterfeit one. The false teachers were accountable for their corruption of God’s truth, but the Galatian Christians were also accountable for being so easily misled by it to pursue legalism.

   Their defection was serious, even deadly, in that they were turning away from God. Paul reminds the Galatians that God called them effectually through the gospel, emphasizing its gracious character. ‘Called’ is an aorist participle and could be translated, ‘who called you once and for all.’ By the phrase ‘grace of Christ’ he refers back to the work of Christ delineated in
verse 4. The gospel is all about ‘grace’ and ‘Jesus Christ.’ For Paul, the gospel is a God-centered way of thinking about man’s condition and God’s remedy. At the heart of the cheapening of grace by the Galatians lies an inadequate appreciation of the human condition.

Paul further stresses the seriousness of the defection by highlighting that to which they were turning. They were rejecting God for a ‘different gospel,’ a completely contrary and ineffective means of being right with God. They were embracing a ‘gospel’ that was a competing message, an alternative to the gospel Paul preached. They were being duped by a counterfeit.

‘Another’ translates allos, which refers to something of the exact same kind. However, the Judaizers’ gospel is not really ‘another’ gospel at all; there is only one message of good news. For Paul, there cannot be ‘another’ gospel. He will not credit multiple ways of salvation, or many roads to heaven, or a variety of ways to fellowship with God. Pluralism for Paul is out of the question. There is only one gospel and all other forms are perversions. For him there is no relative truth: what is true for me may not be true for you. It is a matter of truth versus heresy.

The apostle was going through what Moses went through when he came down from Mount Sinai to find God’s people worshiping the golden calf (cp. Ex. 32:7-8). Paul was as angry as Moses had been. Only instead of throwing down stone tablets, he tried to get in touch with the Galatians before it was too late.

b) A Perverted Gospel (1:7b)

...but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.

‘Are disturbing’ is from tarassō, which literally means to shake back and forth and therefore to agitate and stir up. Figuratively, it connotes deep emotional disturbance and refers to an unsettled mind. Metastrephō (‘to distort’) carries the idea of turning something into its opposite, of reversing and thereby perverting it. Law does not moderately pollute grace but reverses and destroys it. As a means of salvation, the two are diametrically opposed and cannot coexist.

The word ‘pervert’ refers to something reversed, something turned upside down. When the good news about Jesus is right side up, we have the gospel. If we take it and stand it on its head, we end up with the law. But it is not always easy to tell the difference. If you had been in the Galatian church, would you have been able to tell which end was up? Would you have been able to identify the one true gospel? Realize how plausible this other gospel sounded, especially to the Galatians, who were relatively new in the faith. If you had gone to church in Iconium or Lystra, would you have been able to get the gospel right side up?

The Galatian threat came from Jewish Christians from Jerusalem, who followed Paul around and taught his Gentile converts that they must become Jews in order to enjoy the full privileges of the church and the full remission of their sins. They alleged they were acting under the authority of the church in Jerusalem, with the authority of the apostles there. In order to discredit Paul’s doctrine, they attacked his authority. These false teachers are called Judaizers. They taught that Jewish ceremonies, particularly circumcision, were necessary for a full standing in the church.

The Judaizers who plagued the early church claimed to be Christians, and much of their doctrine was orthodox. They must have recognized Jesus as the promised Messiah and even acknowledged the value of His sacrificial death on the cross—otherwise they would never have gotten a hearing in the church. They claimed to believe all the truths that other Christians believed. They did not purport to overtly deny the gospel but to improve it by adding the
requirements, ceremonies, and standards of the Old Covenant to the New. But anything added to grace destroys it just as surely as does anything taken from it.

The counterfeit gospel preached by the Judaizers was based upon the work of Christ plus human endeavor, such as circumcision and Jewish ceremonies. To add to the gospel – whether works, sacraments, baptism, or anything else – is to detract from the gospel. It is no small thing to tamper with God’s perfect provision for the salvation of His people. It is a grave offense against the majesty of God to embellish or modify the gospel to suit our own prejudices or convenience.

Obviously, the success of counterfeiting depends upon the similarity of the forgery to the real thing. The idea of the counterfeit is what Paul means by ‘different.’ The gospel taught by the Judaizers was a counterfeit, and, because it was a counterfeit, it was deadly; it was soul-damning.

Because of their deception, false teachers such as the Judaizers are even more dangerous than those who openly deny ‘that Jesus is the Christ.’ Those who claim to teach and follow Christ while undermining the gospel of His grace are immeasurably more dangerous—because they give the appearance of leading people to Christ while they are actually erecting barriers to salvation by grace.

2. A Damning Gospel (1:8-10)

In verses 8-10 Paul discusses the eternal consequences of the counterfeit. Although the particular heresy of the Judaizers was legalism, Paul’s warning applies equally to the opposite perversion of libertinism or antinomianism, which, under the guise of freedom in Christ, removes all standards of righteousness and morality.

a) Anathema (1:8-9)

But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.

Against any and every distortion of the gospel of Christ, Paul uses very strong language – ‘let him be accursed’ – to emphasize the dangers of the counterfeit gospel. The word translated ‘accursed’ is ‘anathematized’ (anathema). This term is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for the word harem which means ‘ban’ or ‘devote to destruction’ (see Lev. 27:28-29; Dt. 7:26; 13:17). It is vividly illustrated by the story of Achan in Joshua 6. Items that were devoted to the ban were to be destroyed (cp. Jos. 7:1). In 1 Corinthians 16:22, Paul uses this term for eternal damnation. Paul intends his Galatian readers to understand that the agitators among them must be handed over to destruction.

In verse 8, Paul applies the anathema even to himself. He begins by pronouncing this anathema on himself in order to assert that the gospel he preached was the one that he had received directly from the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the apostolic, authoritative gospel, and Paul has not tampered with it. He is prepared to condemn himself for the same perversion of the gospel if he is found guilty of it. It is the gospel and not his own reputation that is at issue.

Next, Paul uses the angels to establish his argument. Just as we know that Paul would not have preached another gospel, we recognize that a pure angel from heaven, who is a servant of God, could not preach another gospel. By introducing angels into the discussion, Paul makes the point that no one in all of the creation has the authority to change the gospel.
The Jews believed that the divine law came through angels (cp. Heb. 2:2; see Gal. 3:19), and the Judaizers may have made the point that this made the Old Covenant and its attendant ceremonies and traditions binding. Paul was, of course, speaking hypothetically. The apostle was reaching for the most fanciful possibilities imaginable to make his point that absolutely no messenger, no matter how seemingly godly and good, should be believed or followed if his teaching does not square with God-revealed apostolic doctrine. The truth outranks anyone’s credentials, and every teacher or preacher must be evaluated on the basis of what he says, not who he is.

In verse 9, Paul applies the principle to the false teachers. The apostle speaks in the indicative rather than in the subjunctive. Verse 8 was hypothetical (‘if anyone should preach’). Verse 9 is actual (‘if anyone does preach’). Paul is addressing the real situation in Galatia, where false teachers were preaching a false gospel. ‘As we have said before’ refers to an earlier visit, not to the preceding clause in the text, since ‘now’ (artī) is an adverb of time. The sense seems to be, ‘What I said at that time I am saying again now.’ From the start of his ministry among them, Paul had warned them of imminent gospel perversions. Here, Paul warns them again that it matters not who a man is, from whom he claims authority, or what credentials he offers; if his gospel differs from Paul’s let him be accursed. When a person rejects the gospel, the free, gracious gift of God’s forgiveness and kingship, then he remains under the divine curse that is the inevitable reflex of God’s holiness towards sin.

Paul employs a verb with technical associations: they had ‘received’ what Paul had preached (cp. 1 Cor. 11:23). In so doing they had acknowledged the message as coming from an authoritative source that transcended the apostle. Now they were turning their backs on it. And in reality they were turning their backs on God.

The repudiation of the gospel of grace is a repudiation of Jesus. Any gospel that introduces anything other than the mercy of God in Jesus Christ as the cause of salvation, is a denial of God Himself. It is to proclaim another authority in opposition to God’s authority. And such a gospel will always eventually be condemned. Paul is not denying the possibility of repentance and forgiveness for individuals who may now be guilty of heresy. But he is asking God to vindicate His truth and uphold His integrity.

Truth exists and truth matters. This is a message that is very much counter-cultural today. But Paul did not just smile at a perversion of the gospel and say, ‘Whatever! Each to his own!’ The gospel is not a matter of Paul’s personal preference. Rather, the word that comes from God is double-edged; a word of salvation and rescue for those who believe it; a word of condemnation for those who reject it or tamper with it.

Although Paul addresses them as true believers, the Galatians were in danger of embracing a perverted gospel, to the detriment of God’s glory and with the attendant danger of apostasy. The purpose of the epistle is to restore the Galatian churches to sound, God-glorifying faith.

b) Motivation (1:10)

For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.

A man’s reputation can be important. But is Paul not overly concerned about his reputation here? More than likely, some of Paul’s accusers were applying the ‘divide and conquer’ rule, suggesting that the apostles of Jerusalem (men like James and Peter) were proclaiming a
different (better!) version of the gospel. These criticisms were powerful enough to utterly undo any claim made by the apostle.

Paul enforces his commitment to the true gospel by speaking of his own motives. The Greek verb rendered ‘persuade’ can also mean ‘appease,’ and that is its sense here. We could translate his questions as: ‘Am I seeking to persuade in order to please men or to please God?’

There was a time, he implies, when he did seek the praise of his fellow Jews by zealously persecuting Christians, assuming he was being faithful to God while concentrating his effort on favoring traditional Judaism. Like most of us, he enjoyed the plaudits of his fellows, who admired his advancement in the Jewish faith, and honored him for his outstanding zeal (1:14). Now, however, things are different. In the light of what he taught and the way he had lived since his conversion the idea that he was still trying to please men was preposterous. Since he became a ‘bondservant of Christ’ he can no longer aim to please men and indulge his religious pride. He had surrendered his life entirely to the lordship of Jesus Christ, and that surrender had cost him dearly in human terms.

Paul thought of himself as a steward of the gospel that he had received. He was not his own man. He was compelled to preach the gospel; he must be a faithful steward of the gospel. Therefore, he could only preach the gospel that he received from God. Since he was not preaching for the favor of men, he would not adopt the methods of man. In speaking this, of course, Paul contrasts his own motives with those of the false teachers who pervert the gospel (v. 7). It was rather Paul’s Jewish accusers who were men pleasers.

Paul was one of those rare individuals who did not live to please anyone except God. If we ask how he was able to do this, the answer is that he was living by the one true gospel. Before he came to Christ, back when he was still a Pharisee, Paul did everything he could to keep up appearances. Back then he was living by a different gospel, which was no gospel at all. Then Paul left Pharisaism behind and came to Christ. He stopped trying to please anyone else and put all his confidence in Jesus Christ. He no longer cared what other people thought of him. He stopped living for his own publicity and started living for God’s pleasure.

Paul states the issue clearly for all Christian ministers. He raises the question that we must constantly be asking: ‘Are we trying to please men or are we trying to please God?’ Paul’s answer is this: please God, not man. We will remain faithful only by reminding ourselves that we are bondservants of God.

3. Modern False Gospels
   a) Ryken

Can you distinguish between the true gospel and all the false gospels in the contemporary church? We worship in a church of many gospels. There is the gospel of material prosperity, which teaches that Jesus is the way to financial gain. There is the gospel of family values, which teaches that Jesus is the way to the happy home. There is the gospel of the self, which teaches that Jesus is the way to personal fulfillment. There is the gospel of religious tradition, which teaches that Jesus is the way to respectability. There is the gospel of morality, which teaches that Jesus is the way to be a good person. What makes these other gospels so dangerous is that the things they offer are all beneficial. Yet as good as all these things are, they are not the good news. When they become for us a sort of gospel, then we are in danger of turning away from the only gospel there is.
The church without the gospel would look very much the way the evangelical church looks at this very moment. We cannot simply assume that we have the gospel. Unless we keep the gospel at the center of the church, we are always in danger of shoving it off to one side and letting something else take its place. Martin Luther rightly warned that ‘there is a clear and present danger that the devil may take away from us the pure doctrine of faith and may substitute for it the doctrines of works and of human traditions. It is very necessary, therefore, that this doctrine of faith be continually read and heard in public.’ The good news of the cross and the resurrection must be preached, believed, and lived. Otherwise, it will be lost.

The church’s greatest danger is not the anti-gospel outside the church; it is the counterfeit gospel inside the church. The Judaizers did not walk around Pisidian Antioch wearing T-shirts that said, ‘Hug me, I’m a false apostle.’ What made them so dangerous was that they knew how to talk the way Christians talk. They used all the right terminology. We should expect, therefore, that the most serious threat to the one true gospel is something that is also called the gospel. The most dangerous teachers are the ones who preach a different Christ but still call him ‘Jesus.’ Not everyone who calls himself a Christian serves Christ, and not everything called the gospel is the gospel. It is not mere words that save; it is the realities of the one true gospel that save—Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection for sinners.

b) Pipa

What are some of the modern counterfeits with which we should be concerned? We can divide them into three categories. First, there is the liberal gospel that says that Christ is a good example and we are to follow Him. As long as our good works outweigh our bad works, all is well between us and God.

The second modern counterfeit is the sacramental gospel. The sacramental gospel is the gospel of the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches. To the work of Christ these churches add works and penance, prayers and sacraments, and mass as ways to atone for sin. Such a gospel is another gospel, a soul-damning gospel. There is a modern, Protestant perversion of the gospel that comes perilously close to the sacramentalism of Rome and teaches that baptism unites us to Christ, and as long as we are covenantally faithful we remain in Christ. This teaching replaces regeneration and conversion with baptismal union. It too is deadly.

The third modern counterfeit gospel is not necessarily soul-damning, but its consequences are soul-damaging. That is the gospel of Arminianism that asserts human autonomy in coming to Christ; the sinner is free to choose for or against Christ and may choose to apostatize after he is converted. This free will gospel ultimately is an expression of the gospel that diminishes the full gracious provision of God in Christ and adds to it the works of faith and perseverance.

For next time: Read Galatians 1:11-24; Philippians 3:2-7; and Acts 9:1-31.