

It's a privilege to launch us into a new teaching series titled Galatians: Life Begins Now.

In Kevin's *Ekklesia* series, he showed us the church is made up of those called to live as an alternative community. A community of hope in God's New Kingdom. A kingdom inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and continuing to grow by giving new life to all who believe in Jesus Christ. And we are to be recognized as a transformed community because we are committed to staying attentive to God's word, prayer and be discerning to recognize the false messages that bombard us every day. Kevin challenged us last week to practice biblical hospitality to our neighbors as well as those who are not like us.

So now, Galatians. It's a reminder to us that to be the *Ekklesia* God intends; we need to all be grounded in the true gospel. Without the gospel of grace, we will not be the people God wants us to be or be the people we want to be.

Some themes that we will see in the next ten weeks as we study Galatians: We can live freely in Christ based on grace. God is our protector and Father, and he is gracious to prodigals. Attacks legalism: maintaining a list of dos and don'ts, rituals, and traditions will not save us from sin and this present evil age that fights hard to wrongly formed us. Bluntly rebukes those who are chasing after another gospel instead of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. This should warn us that no one is immune from the temptation to desert the true gospel. Paul makes it clear that some things are worth fighting for, and the true gospel is one of those things.

Galatians upholds the significance that we are a community built on grace apart from the Law. In Galatians chapter 2, Paul says to us, "know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ."

The Story of the Prodigal Son

Luke 15

I'd like to begin by telling you a story that Jesus told. It's about a young man who ruined his life. He had an older brother and a father. One day he said to his father, "Dad, give me my share of the inheritance. I want it now." And his father divided his property, and this younger son cashed out his share. This young son now had a big wad of cash. Instead of investing or saving it, he decided to leave home and head off to a distant country. As Jesus described it, "He squandered his wealth in wild living." You get the impression that for a season, he was the life of the party. He spent his fortune on every pleasure and indulgence. Eventually, the party ended, along with that, a famine hit the country, and the son began to be in need. Finally, he landed a job feeding pigs.

Apparently, that didn't pay well because he was hungry. So hungry he wanted to eat the slop, he fed the pigs. He had made a mess of things. He was out of money, out of food, out of help, and out of hope. We will hear the rest of the story a little later. But this first part of the story should get us asking ourselves some questions.

What do we do when we've made a mess of things? Where do we go when we have blown it? Where do we turn when we have embittered our child, betrayed our spouse, when we have alienated a team member at work, or driven a wedge between friends? Where do we go when we have drifted away from the faith, or compromised our integrity, our morals? What hope is there for us if we have turned our backs on God? If these questions resonate with you, then the book of Galatians is for you!

For Life to Begin Again, We Need to Go Back to the Gospel of Grace

Let's get to know Paul a little better. He was a man on a gospel mission from God. "*Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the brothers and sisters with me,*" (Gal. 1:1-2a). As we would expect, Paul begins his letter by introducing himself. The first thing he makes clear is that he is an apostle. Apostle is a special title. It's the one Jesus used for His special representatives. We should get used to calling him "the apostle Paul" rather than "Saint Paul" because every Christian is a saint in New Testament vocabulary. Notice that Paul is careful to distinguish himself from all the brothers and sisters in the faith that are with him.

Paul begins by going on the defensive. He defends his apostleship, and he defends the gospel. Apostleship and gospel are two themes that continue throughout this letter. Why did Paul go on the defensive? As we will see later, these false teachers taught that the young converts who accepted Paul's gospel were not fully Christian unless they got circumcised and embraced the entire Jewish Law. So understandably, these new converts were confused. Was Paul an imposter or an apostle?

Paul defends his apostleship by telling them he was not sent by men. His apostleship didn't come from his home church in Antioch. God had called him by grace and revealed Jesus to him. Right up front, Paul makes it clear that the gospel came right from the mouth of Christ, and he had the credibility to speak into the lives of the Galatians and rebuke the false teachers who preached against the pure gospel Paul preached.

"To the churches in Galatia:" (v. 2b). Where are the churches in Galatia? Most scholars agree Paul planted churches in the southern part of Asia Minor in several different cities on his first missionary journey. You can read about his amazing first missionary journey in Acts 13-14.

"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ," (v. 3). Paul wishes them grace and peace. God's grace given to us is the basis of the gospel. God's peace means that because of the gospel, we can have peace with God (Salvation) and peace in our own hearts because God has entered into a relationship with us through the gospel. We can have peace with others because God has created a new community of believers who can live as one despite their backgrounds, culture, and race.

Then Paul specifies that the price paid for this grace and peace was the death of God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. *"Who gave himself for our sins" (v. 4a).* He literally sacrificed himself for our sins. Jesus' death was more than a display of love, which it was; more than a heroic act, which it was. It was a sacrifice for sin. He willingly gave his life to be the sacrifice needed for our sin. In Galatians 3, we are told that Jesus bore the curse and judgment our sin deserved. He became our substitute, our sin-offering. All our sins were put on his own shoulders, and he paid for them with his death. Martin Luther comments that Paul's words here are "the very thunderclaps from heaven against all kinds of unrighteousness."

"To rescue us from the present evil age," (v. 4a). The gospel is a rescue operation to set people free from a state of bondage. Rescue in Greek is *exareo* used to describe how God rescued the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. In that same way, Christ died to rescue us from the present evil age. The Bible divides history into two ages: this age and the age to come. It tells us that this present evil age is the totality of all world affairs, the totality of all of fallen creation, and the totality of all human life dominated by sin. The Bible tells us that the age to come has already arrived because Christ inaugurated it when he began his ministry. But the present evil age has not yet passed away, so the two ages are running their courses in parallel. The purpose of Christ's death was not only to bring us forgiveness but also bring us new life now, even while the present evil age rages around us.

"...according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (v. 4b-5). And this all happened according to the will of our God. As if we thought that we could achieve our own rescue according to our will. The gospel was God's plan; he set it in motion, he paid its price, and he is carrying it to completion. He alone receives the glory. We reap the benefits, but in no way do we receive any credit. God's grace is a gift to us. No wonder Paul ends this first paragraph with a doxology and a big amen.

This is why Paul is so astonished that his beloved churches in Galatia were being seduced by a different gospel. If you look at Paul's other letters, they begin with a paragraph telling his audience how thankful he was for them. You see paragraphs of thanksgiving in his letters to the Philippians and the Colossians and in his first letter to the Corinthians, but not in his letter to the Galatians.

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all" (6-7a). They were deserting the one who called them. They were not just deserting a message from Paul; they were deserting God Himself, turning away, rejecting the one who called them by the grace of Christ.

That word astonished means both surprised and outraged that they had turned so quickly. One commentator said that Paul was gobsmacked. Hand over the mouth, eyebrows raised, flabbergasted and shocked because these Galatians were rejecting the one who sacrificed to save them. The word deserting means to transfer one's allegiance, such as soldiers who would fight for the other side or politicians who would change parties.

The Galatians had heard the truth. They had put on the jersey of righteousness and were now trying to turn back to the trash can to pull out and put on their old jerseys of law and works. The hopeful news is that the word translated deserting is a continuous present tense verb, which means they were in process. Paul could still fight for them. Paul could still rebuke them, correct them.

The word Paul uses for "different" in verse 6 is *eteros*. It means something of a different nature. Literally, Paul is accusing them of "turning to a gospel of a different kind."

"Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse! vv. 7b-9

This false gospel has shaken them and agitated them but left them in turmoil. To pervert literally means to reverse something, to call good bad and bad good.

Some of us find ourselves in a similar situation as the Galatians. We embraced the gospel with great enthusiasm at first, but we've found that living the Christian life isn't what we expected. So we begin to listen to messages that tell us that something more is needed to get us where we want to go in life.

I remember a year into my new faith in Christ. I had a small group of guys that I met with for Bible Study. They were serious about Christ, more serious than I was. Our leader was serious. And I felt a pull, an attraction to those guys. And on the other side, I had the pull of a first-year college student just trying to fit in and do adult things. Looking back, it was as if I was straddling a picket fence. Just straddling is uncomfortable enough. But on one side, I had men of God pulling me toward the things of God, and on the other side, men of the world were pulling me toward the things of the world.

But I had this one friend who really cared. In the most confusing crisis of faith while in college, my friend would show up outside my bedroom window on Sunday mornings, and drag me out of bed, toss me a granola bar, and drive me usually against my will to church in his Volkswagen Bug. I had no shower, total bedhead; it didn't matter to my friend. This commitment to pull me toward the things of God made all the difference in this confused young believer. I saw my friend this past summer, still faithfully preaching in a church in Camarillo, affected somewhat by

the onset of Parkinson's. He continues to preach the pure gospel. Get yourself around people in your life who are passionate about God and love you enough to pull you toward the comforting things of God.

Deserting the gospel is a possibility for all of us. How do we avoid deserting the gospel of grace?

Hold tenaciously to what you have been taught. Verse 8 says don't even listen to an angel if he is preaching something different than the gospel. Charles Spurgeon had the right advice: "Cling tightly with both your hands; and when they fail, catch hold with your teeth; and if they give way, hang on by your eyelashes!" Let Scripture be your final authority on your beliefs and practices. Heed the warnings. Paul is warning the Galatians. No one likes to be warned. But warnings do save lives. Walk and Don't Walk save lives.

Just as God kept me from being devoured by lesser gospels, so he will keep you. *"To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—" (Jude 24). "He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. 1:8). "being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Phil. 1:6).*

So hold tenaciously to what we have been taught, heed the warnings of Scripture and put your hope confidently in Jesus. Jesus said, *"My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand" (John 10:29).*

"Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ" (v. 10). Understand Paul's line of thinking here "Would I rebuke you, and point out how you have perverted the gospel if my goal was to please you and gain your approval? Of course not. I am compelled to tell you the truth because I am a servant of Christ above all things. If my goal was admiration, wouldn't I just remain a pharisee? I won major awards as a pharisee."

What are some practices you can do to break the habit of pleasing people? How about being intentional to reach out and show hospitality to someone who is politically the polar opposite of you? Who thinks about mandates differently than you do. Who has a completely different answer than you have to the problems our society faces. Show them hospitality. How about the next time you are tempted to draw attention to yourself and promote yourself, turn it around, and promote Jesus, who is the real hero of your story.

For Life to Begin Again, We Need to Go Back to the Gospel of Grace

And Paul does that; he goes back to the gospel again in verses 11-12. It's as if he is saying, "Let me repeat the question, if I have majorly messed up, how is it possible for life to begin again?" Because of the gospel of grace. It's possible because the gospel comes from God, not from man. *"I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ" (vv. 11-12).*

And Paul continues in verse 12 to say that this gospel wasn't even passed down through another man or institution. Nope. "I received it by a revelation from Jesus Christ." The only human to touch the gospel before Paul was the God-man, Jesus. Jesus is the source, the content, and the goal of the gospel message. Paul is simply passing it on. Paul could have used a string of tightly argued proofs from theology or quoted more scriptures to prove his gospel message, but instead, Paul simply tells his own story as proof.

For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus. Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas (Peter) and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother. I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. vv. 13-20

Paul's story is he had life again because of the gospel of grace. How do we begin life again? If we have messed up, how do we get back to grace? When we left our story, the prodigal son was far away from his father, ashamed, and so hungry he wanted to eat pig slop.

Let's hear the rest of the story. Jesus tells us that the son came to his senses and returned to his father. He was intent on confessing his sin against God and against his father and hoped to just land a job as a hired hand. But as he was coming home, his father had been watching and saw him when he was still far off. Then the father was filled with compassion for his wayward son, so excited for his son to come home. The father ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him. He brought him in and cleaned him up, and planned a feast to celebrate. My son was dead and is alive again; my son was lost, and now he is found.

It's a beautiful story. Many of us can relate to the prodigal son. However, some of us don't. We don't see ourselves as rebellious. We are pleasers, responsible, doers of good things, church things. People like us, respect us, and we like the feeling it gives us. We notice others around us who are blowing it, and we say under our breath, "At least I'm not like that."

Then Jesus introduces us to the older son. During all the excitement of his little brother coming home, he was working as he always was out in the field. When he heard all the celebrating, he came and asked one of the hired men what was happening. When he heard what his father had done for his little brother, he became angry. He refused to join in the celebration. When his father heard, he went to his older son to explain.

But his oldest son began to lecture his father. "Look! All these years, I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never even gave me a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this other son of yours squanders your property on prostitutes and comes home, you celebrate." And the father responded, "Everything I have is yours. But we have to celebrate. Your younger brother was dead, and now he is alive again. He was lost and is found."

Jesus leaves us with the tension that we don't know if the older brother ever came around to accept and be grateful for his father's grace to his brother. But today, we can see that both sons were "lost." They were equally in need of being found, but the older brother didn't recognize his need. If you relate to the older brother, you may look at the prodigals around you who sin big, and everyone knows it, and you get their need for Jesus. But you struggle to see the need in the prideful person, the person who looks good on the outside.

For those of us who are elder-brother types, we think if everyone looked like us, the world would be a better place. But Jesus' parable cuts us to the heart because he is saying that the ones who are truly lost are the ones who don't recognize their need. What can we learn from the older brother?

1. The elder brother thought because he obeyed the rules, he deserved blessing. That's how the elder brother felt. "All these years I've been slaving for you...yet you never gave me even a young goat..." Have you ever felt short-changed by God? Have you felt that your service has been overlooked and that you deserve a pat on the back? Has your pride put you in a place where you think it's actually possible to earn God's grace?

2. The elder brother's motive was to receive love, not to show love to his father. So, for us, our relationship with our heavenly Father should center on pleasing Him, loving Him, and growing closer to Him, even if it means we don't get everything we want. We break out of the elder brother syndrome when we go to Jesus for who He is, not what He can give us.

3. The Elder Brother didn't share his father's heart. He didn't share his joy. He resented his joy. As Christians, our hearts should be broken by the things that break the heart of God. And our hearts should be filled with joy by the things that bring joy to the Father. That means we need to know Him and what He truly wants.

As I was reflecting on this story, I was convicted this week on how my pride causes me to trust more in my own works rather than in God's grace. I felt convicted to see more clearly my motive to please people instead of pleasing God. God help all of us. May we never become the Pharisees who are blinded by our own "goodness."

Whether your heart feels empty when you do good or whether your heart feels empty when you do bad things, Galatians is right for you.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

Because the life we want to live now needs to be formed by something out of this world, it needs to be formed by grace.

I want to invite each of us to go back to grace. Let's make a resolution that every time we blow it, we'll go back to grace. We won't ignore it, play dumb, hide, or blame our spouse, our boss, or our mom and dad.

You and I go back to grace when we kneel at the cross where Jesus Christ has already taken the blame and condemnation and guilt upon himself. Whether you have been seduced by the world or seduced by the Law, you can go back to grace. You and I go back to grace when we surrender to the promises of God. You and I go back to grace when we humbly confess our sins, our self-righteousness, and our pride. You and I go back to grace when we confidently receive God's forgiveness. You and I go back to grace when we celebrate the grace and peace Christ's sacrifice brings to our lives.

If you find yourself among the pigs, the message of grace is what you need and still flows to you. If you find yourself in the middle of church doing good stuff, the message of grace is what you need and still flows to you. What is the way back to grace? The way back couldn't be easier. All it takes is a heartfelt amen to all that God has done for you.

Grace and peace to you (prodigal) from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Gal.1: 3-5)

Go back to grace so life can begin again. Amen.

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