

This week we are diving into chapter 2:1-10. By way of reminder, whenever we are reading a part of the Bible, we are reading into a particular circumstance and a particular situation. Even more specifically, as we read the New Testament letters, we are actually reading someone else's mail. They were letters written from a church leader to a church that was facing a difficult circumstance. Over the next few weeks, it is going to prove important for us to remember that as we work our way through the text.

Christianity began as a Jewish messianic movement in Jerusalem. But the message of the gospel transcends one people group and expands to all of humanity. So after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the message spread quickly beyond Jerusalem. Hence, why we, 7500 miles and 2000 years later, gather today and worship Jesus.

Historically, the covenant people of God were focused on one ethnic group, the Israelites. What set Israel apart, prior to Jesus, was their adherence to the covenant demands as laid out in the Old Testament: Kosher dietary laws, Sabbath observance, etc. One of the major ones we will see throughout the early chapters of Galatians is the circumcision of males.

Here is the tension. As the gospel exploded beyond Jerusalem, many of these Jewish Christians believed that if those non-Jews (Gentiles) were to truly be part of God's family, they had to also adhere to these laws. In short, their salvation was bound up by adherence to these "works of the law" that made them Jewish.

You can imagine when Paul is going around preaching that the gospel that rejects the works of the law, that the gospel is actually for a unified multi-ethnic community bound by faith in the grace of Jesus rather than adherence to covenant commands, this stirred up some extreme opposition.

A group had risen up that was challenging Paul's authority saying he was preaching a false gospel because it was extending beyond the historical bounds of Israel. But Paul is insistent and aggressively confident in his authority in the gospel. This controversial gospel challenges our propensity to earn or prove our status and salvation before God.

### **Galatians 2:1-10**

So in this text, Paul transitions from defending his Apostolic authority and message of the gospel to demonstrating what the gospel does for the church as a distinct community.

**Then after fourteen years, I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went in response to a revelation and, meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders, I presented to them the gospel that I preach among**

**the Gentiles. I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain. Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. Galatians 2:1-3**

There is so much controversy Paul is attempting to diffuse that he deems it essential for him to travel all the way to Jerusalem again. And the text says that he goes, not to learn, not to earn credibility from the other apostles because he knows and is certain that his message was given to him by direct revelation from Jesus. But rather, he goes to Jerusalem because he wants to be sure he is not running in vain. Meaning, is the gospel that he is taking to the Gentiles just causing division, and does he need to recalibrate his focus? This is why the text says, "meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders, I presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles."

Well, what is the gospel that Paul is preaching? And why is it causing such a stir? I want to spend just a few minutes reviewing what Paul has said thus far about this controversial gospel. Looking back to chapter 1, we see Paul summarize not only his thesis for this letter but a summary of the gospel.

**Grace and peace to you 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. Galatians 1:3-5**

The gospel is a four-fold message, according to Paul.

- (1) Jesus...gave himself for our sins
- (2) to rescue us from the present evil age
- (3) according to the will of our God and Father
- (4) to whom be glory for ever and ever.

The beginning and central aspect of the gospel is the death of Jesus, which leads to a new exodus out of "the present evil age" according to God's glorious plan. This is the fundamental focus of the letter of the Galatians. And it is really important for us to understand this because if we get this right, the complexity of the letter to the Galatians will make sense in light of this thesis.

This event, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus is the historical event that forces us to reorient everything in our lives around a new reality. Listen to what New Testament scholar N.T. Wright says about this in his great commentary on Galatians.

**The gospel message is all about something that has happened in Jesus, as a result of which the world is a different place. Jesus-followers are summoned**

## **to recognize that they now live in that different world and are to order their lives accordingly.**

And the event that Paul is talking about, that Jesus inaugurated, is the coming of the “age to come,” what Jesus elsewhere calls “eternallife.” It has burst into the here-and-now and offers us the opportunity for life to begin now!

Paul's problem with his accusers is that in light of Jesus' crucifixion, they never reoriented their lives around the new reality. They were imposing old creation principles and truths onto people and not preaching the gospel of the new creation that was breaking into the now! There are, according to Paul, two “ages” that are currently operative in our world. The “present evil age” and what the New Testament writers often called “the age to come.”

The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus launched the “age to come” that is breaking into this present evil age. The Kingdom of God is available, and we are now living into this liminal space between the present evil age and the age to come. So then, as we embody the way of Jesus, we live more in light of the kingdom of God here and now.

This is what the gospel is doing. It is the saving work of God that is liberating us out of the bondage of our sins that enslave us to “this present evil age.” This is what we are enslaved in and needing freedom and liberation from. The gospel is Jesus' saving work on the cross that enables us to be liberated from the bondage of our own sin and moves us to live into the new realm of the age to come in the present, right in the midst of this present evil age.

Let's remember Paul's story. In Paul's former life, he was marked by ways of living that were fully oriented and animated by “the present evil age,” the old creation dynamics. Let me break this down one step further in light of the controversy at hand in Paul's letter.

### **Paul's Former Life - The Preaching of the Judaizers**

This was preaching that the gospel was for people of all cultures, backgrounds, and anyone who trusts in Jesus and is willing to become culturally Jewish through the ritual of circumcision and obedience of Jewish laws and customs, through “the works of the law.” This was generative of coercion, power-grabbing, and destructive ways of living that corroded both the individual and the community.

### **Paul's New Life - Preaching of the Gospel of Grace**

Paul was preaching a message that the gospel is for people of all cultures, backgrounds, and any and all who trust in Jesus. Nothing more, simply grace through faith. What Paul had come to realize is that through the cross, Jesus has ushered in “the age to come” that necessitates a re-orientation of his entire life. It is through the work of the cross that this has come. And our salvation is now possible because we are thoroughly oriented around the “age to come” or “new creation.”

This gospel of grace was scandalous for the 1st-century Jewish religious audience. Because to take the gospel to the Gentiles meant to associate with those who were formerly considered off limits. This is what Grace does when operating in the lives of the church. Listen to the way

author Philip Yancey defines grace. “True grace is shocking, scandalous. It shakes our conventions with its insistence on getting close to sinners and touching them with mercy and hope.” This is the freedom that Paul is preaching from, that any and all who trust in the work of Jesus, orienting their lives around that reality, are free from the bondage and sin of the old creation dynamics.

This is why Paul's life was marked by such a radical change. His former life, when he was persecuting Christians, was trying through coercion and forced works of the law and some sort of purity to save. Thus, he was trying to smash this new movement of Jesus followers who were saying there was a new way, a way of grace. Look back at the end of chapter 1.

**Then I went to Syria and Cilicia. I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only heard the report: “The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.” And they praised God because of me. Galatians 1:21-24**

The transformation of Paul's life was so drastic that the churches in the region couldn't deny the effects of the gospel. It was a transformation of a life that was oriented around “this present evil age” and is now oriented around a life shaped by the cross. The phrase “is now preaching the faith” is an interesting word in the Greek. The word is the verbal form of the word gospel. It could literally be translated as *gospeling*. They only heard the report: “The man who formerly persecuted us is now *gospeling* the faith he once tried to destroy.” And they praised God because of me.”

Paul's life that was once recognized as the embodiment of the old creation manifest in his very person has been so radically transformed that he is now a living example of the new creation. This is the stunning and shocking work of the gospel. This is why you get verse 3 in Chapter 2, “*Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek.*”

When Paul goes to Jerusalem to explain the gospel he is preaching; it was that you didn't have to become Jewish to be saved, particularly circumcision that was the most obvious sign one had converted. So Paul takes Titus, a Greek Gentile, to the apostles in Jerusalem to see whether they would force Titus to be circumcised, which would be a sign for Paul that they had not embraced the gospel of grace. But Paul is pleased that the apostles in Jerusalem did not try to coerce or compel him to be circumcised. The Jerusalem apostles did not fight against Paul's gospel but accepted it as revelation from God.

The controversial gospel was a radical reorienting of the good news of Jesus to any and all who trust Jesus. Period. It demolished all preconceived notions of having to earn salvation through works of the law.

What made this gospel so startlingly different and controversial? How else would this gospel of grace reorient the community of believers in ways that were profoundly different in Paul's day? Paul will spend the rest of this section (and the entire letter) detailing things that are transformed by this gospel in the life of the community of believers.

## Gospel Freedom, Unity, Mission

The first thing we will see is that afforded to this community is a controversial gospel of freedom.

**“This matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.”  
Galatians 2:4-5**

For Paul, the authenticity of the gospel is correlated with the freedom that it produces in its followers. And for the churches in Galatia, “some false believers” had worked their way into the community and were pulling the entire church back to the dynamics of the old creation. They were not embracing the life that was available to live into the new creation.

For the hyper-religious, this is the threat of the gospel. If, as Paul is preaching, the crucifixion of Jesus brings about the possibility that any and all who trust in that work of Jesus are able to embrace the salvation and life of new creation, without any other restraints, the religious have no way to control them.

The gospel liberates us from bondage; it liberates all weights and burdens that are placed on us, and to return any of those burdens back onto us is no gospel at all. To resort back to the need to embody the “works of the law” would be to retreat from the very gospel itself. We no longer have to carry the burden of our own salvation because the freedom we experience in the gospel is that we cannot and no longer have to manufacture our own freedom.

So we can stop living oriented around “this present evil age” that offers us stories of salvation that never deal with the problem. Whatever it is that you tend to chase down in search of freedom, the gospel says to lean into Jesus, not your own abilities, not your own success. The only thing that matters is that our lives are in Christ.

This freedom of the gospel was so profound that people were infiltrating the ranks of the church because it seemed so radically different. But Paul says he never gave into them for a moment because he wanted to uphold the truth of the gospel. So the first thing Paul notes here is that the controversial gospel provides a deep resonate controversial freedom; the second thing the gospel offers is controversial unity.

**As for those who were held in high esteem—whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not show favoritism—they added nothing to my message. On the contrary, they recognized that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised. For God, who was at work in Peter as an apostle to the circumcised, was also at work in me as an apostle to the Gentiles. vv. 6-8**

Remember, the context. The tension that was so deeply embedded into the church was that of ethnocentrism. Did a Gentile have to become a Jew in order to be saved? Did the Gentile believers have to adopt the laws, rituals, and customs that were fundamentally cultural identity

markers in order to be saved? These cultural identity markers became the dividing lines within this burgeoning young church. For Paul, this was unacceptable. If the gospel is true, then to divide the church based on cultural lines was to remain enslaved to the dynamics and principles of the old creation.

But notice that this isn't a dismissing of our cultural identities. It isn't that Paul wants to flatten all ethnic differences, quite the opposite. Paul says that we have the freedom to bring our differences into the family of God and that it is in this diverse tapestry of believers that we receive a fuller picture of the gospel work of God. The gospel says that there is no part of yourself that needs to be checked at the door because the gospel is not a movement of ethnocentrism but of the embrace and welcome of any and all who simply put their trust in Jesus. It is a radical vision of what the “new humanity” will look like because of the embracing work of Jesus on the cross.

And Paul is insistent that the Gentiles are allowed to be themselves, bringing all of themselves to the gospel community without having to shed any of their “Gentile-ness” in order to become Jewish. This is a profoundly deep and, in many ways, controversial unity in a world that would rather demarcate divisions, lines, and hierarchies that keep some people out and others more central.

Next week as we move further through chapter 2, we see Paul attack the idea of ethnocentrism head on, refusing, in strong terms, to allow it to divide the church. The call of Paul here is that we must immerse ourselves fully into the gospel, which transcends cultural differences in a manner that doesn't dismiss but actually embraces them as the beautifully diverse mosaic that constitutes the new humanity as marked by the gospel.

Paul is declaring that if you are elevating some aspect of your culture over others and imposing it on them in order to find some sense of self-righteousness, you are acting sinfully counter to the gospel of Jesus. This is the foundation of the Christian witness against racism, classism, and any other divisions that we can think of that negate some at the expense of others. The controversial gospel offers a profoundly counter-cultural unity because this community is not constituted by anything anyone within the community has done but rather is constituted by the liberating grace of God. Period.

Therefore, we must resist any tendencies and propensities within us to favor one group of people over the other because of particularities of their cultural identity, not their gospel identity. Rather, we allow the particularity to shine, seeing each unique contribution to the whole. When one particular group is being dismissed and marginalized, we recognize that as a failure and work toward standing up for the other.

If we are to be a gospel community, we have to constantly monitor the ways that we may favor certain cultural markers over others, ensuring that we do not add to the gospel of freedom. This is the freedom of the gospel, that our identities are taken up (not abolished, but brought into thriving community) into the *Ekklesia* and given space to flourish. A radical community built on the freedom that is cultivated on the gospel of grace that gives way to a gospel unity rooted in the same gospel.

So the controversial gospel illuminates a new controversial freedom, a diverse controversial unity, and the last thing the gospel illuminates for us is a controversial mission.

**James, Cephas, and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along. vv. 9-10**

Finally, Paul closes his discussion on his trip to Jerusalem to talk to the “pillar Apostles” James, Peter, and John. Now, the contention around Paul’s controversial gospel was so strong, and there was so much resistance to his message that he went not to get approval but to reconcile that his gospel was from sources independent from them. But notice how Paul details this exchange, “[they] gave the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me.” What an interesting way to detail their recognition of God’s work in his life.

You see, the transformative work of the gospel in Paul’s life was so profound that it necessitated recognition of the validity of his message. When Paul uses the term “the grace given to me” to describe his calling and ministry, he is identifying not just what he is stepping into but also what he was stepping out of. Prior to Paul’s conversion, he was a part of a movement that was so anti-Gentile, that it was literally trying to kill off those who were claiming a gospel of grace apart from the Judaism that constituted Paul’s identity. He was a persecutor of Christians. He hated Gentiles.

In Paul’s former life, Gentiles represented a distortion and hindrance to the Kingdom of God. They were to be avoided. But now, the veil of hostility has been broken through the work of Jesus, and Paul couldn’t imagine that separation remaining. And he is confessing that it was only the transformative grace of God that could transform his heart stuck in hatred and brokenness into a Christian minister proclaiming the very thing he was trying to destroy. This is where the power of the gospel lies and not in any human authority.

As what can seem like an out-of-place tagline, Paul notes agreement across the Jerusalem believers and himself that taking care of the poor was a gospel issue. The tense of the verb here indicates a continual action to continue to remember the poor. Most likely, it is a specific inference that they take care of the Jerusalem Church, which was under intense financial troubles at the time. But also a general understanding of the need to take care of the vulnerable among them. Because this is what it means to operate in the “age to come.” To live in response to the event of the gospel that had taken place.

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

The controversial gospel invites us to reorient the whole of our lives around the work of Jesus.

As I was preparing for today’s sermon, I couldn’t help but think of the absurd ways the gospel has radically transformed both Paul’s life and my own life time and time again, reorienting the whole of who I am.

My early high school years were when I was so angry and overrun with hatred. I operated from a place of darkness. I was always angry and lashed out at anyone and everyone. But God grabbed ahold of my heart, and the grace given to me was a radical softening of a heart and internal disposition defined by hate.

In my early college years, I felt called to ministry and allowed my heart to harden into a deep self-righteousness that seemed much more in line with Paul’s pre-conversion. While I wasn’t persecuting Christians like Paul, I viewed anyone as lesser than myself. My outlook on them was defined by some sense of moral superiority that I had constructed in my head—all the while not realizing that this posture was rot through. But through the painful gracious love of God, my hypocrisy was exposed, and God once again helped me pick up the pieces of a broken life of self-righteousness.

This is a story that repeats itself over and over in my life. As the years go on, I learn more and more the need I have for the transformative power of the gospel. Paul’s life was the very sight of God’s in-breaking gospel. I can also identify those times when my life was reoriented and reconstituted by the work of the gospel.

And while I can point to specific times that I felt God break into my life to re-center on the gospel, it is taking years to reorient my life around God. What I have noticed is that throughout the many times I’ve reoriented my life around Jesus, it usually consists of two steps, repentance and renewing my mind. Over and over again, the invitation is to renew ourselves around the dynamics of the gospel.

I want to close with some questions: When people look at your life, do they see a life marked by the controversial gospel of grace? Are you embracing the freedom that is offered by the gospel in your life? Or are you stuck in old creation principles, stuck in an old manner of life? Is your life marked by a commitment to the radical unity of the church made possible by the gospel? How has the transformative power of the gospel reoriented your life around “the age to come”? Where are you resisting God’s transformative work?

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