

I. Set Up

A. In 1738, a group of friends gathered together to read a book one of them had just found. This group of Oxford students would end up profoundly changing the world by helping launch the Great Awakening, and two of them – Charles and John Wesley – would also end up starting the Methodist Church, and planting hundreds of churches in the United State and Great Britain.

B. But on that night, they sat down to read together, they did not know God personally. This was their self-assessment, not mine. They were very religious – in fact, they had already been serving as missionaries and pastors. But they found God to be elusive. However, on that night things changed. William Holland read from a book he had stumbled across. This is what he would later write in his journal.

1. “[as] Mr. Charles Wesley read the Preface aloud...there came such a power over me as cannot well describe; my great burden fell off in an instant; my heart was so filled with peace and love that I burst into tears. I almost thought I saw our Savior! My companions, perceiving me so affected, fell on their knees and prayed. When I afterwards went into the street, I could scarcely feel the ground I trod upon.”¹

C. Holland would mark this as the turning point in his life. And so every night, he went around to all of his friends and said, “Let me read this to you!” What book was he reading? It was the preface of Martin Luther’s commentary on Galatians, in which Luther attempts to summarize the short – but very powerful letter – that Paul wrote back in 50 AD. Among the things Luther writes in the preface is this about being reconciled to God: “What, have we then nothing to do? No Nothing!! Accept of Him who of God is made unto us wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption”

D. Luther was writing about Paul’s letter to the Galatians, which turned out to be one of the most important books in the New Testament. And though this might surprise you, it’s a very anti-religious book. Today we continue our series on Galatians, looking at the big idea – the central theme: the Gospel.

II. Intro

A. In one of the devotions we published during the REACH Initiative, a woman wrote, “I grew up in church, so I had the disadvantage of thinking I knew what it was about: Believe and behave. Believe in Jesus and be good. If I do that, God will love me.” Her initial instincts were wrong, but very common. Many people - perhaps you? – think that this is what the Christian faith is all about: believe and behave. And if your belief is strong enough and your behavior is good enough, then God will shine on you, and when you die you go to heaven.

B. This is pretty close to what the Judaizers – the group that blew into Galatia shortly after Paul left - sold to the Christian there. This is a lot of what people were subscribing to back in Luther’s day. This is what the Wesley brothers thought.

C. This is a common view today.² Indeed, it is the view many of you hold. It only makes sense. If you are good, good things should happen. When you do well in school you get promoted. When you work hard you get a raise. This is the way things work.

¹ Cited from Dallimore, George Whitefield, p, 183.

² Mark Twain described church as “good people standing in front of good people teaching them to be good people.”

D. And so this is what most people believe. In fact, a few years back, Dr. Christian Smith and Dr. Melinda Denton, professors of sociology completed a study of young people who attend church and then announced that, according to historic definitions they were not Christians. They were Moral Therapeutic Deists. They believe in God and they might even believe in Jesus. But what they really believe is that the goal of life is to be nice, kind, pleasant, respectful and responsible so that you can be happy and successful now, and go to heaven when you die. And that God is someone you do not need to relate to unless life isn't working.

E. Smith and Denton also noted that this is what these young people subscribed to because this is what they had been taught. Or, at the very least, this is what they have picked up from their parents.

F. For the record, if you care what Jesus said, if you care about what the New Testament teaches - if you care about what Paul wrote about in Galatians - Christianity and Moral Therapeutic Deism are not the same thing. Believe and behave is not the Good News. In fact, Paul jumps up and down screaming to get people to realize that those who are religious - those who are trying to earn God's love - are missing the main point.

III. Last week

A. I opened with an overview of religion, which I defined as: *as believing that following rules and rituals makes us good – better than others – and qualifies us for God's love.*

B. I then noted that: 1) we are all religious; 2) that there are some upsides to this; 3) but that religion is a failed project. We cannot reach up to God. We cannot save ourselves. Indeed, the starting assumptions of the Christian faith are profoundly anti-religious. We cannot reach up; we cannot earn; God has to reach down.

C. We then started to look at Galatians, which:

1. is a letter Paul wrote to the churches he founded in the Roman province of Galatia, who he felt were being led astray;

2. the letter has an edge to it, because Paul is mad. And he is mad because he believes they are making a huge mistake. They are giving up the Gospel and adopting religion. Instead of understanding that salvation is a free gift from God; instead of understanding that we can be reconciled to God by grace along through faith alone in Christ alone, they are buying the idea that we are saved by faith + works. What Paul *had* taught them was: SLIDE #2 Faith = Salvation + Works. What they now believe is: SLIDE #3 Faith + Works = Salvation.

3. Now, the works they were focused on were first century issues – circumcision, dietary issues, Jewish ceremonial law. Not the stuff we fret about. When we slide into religion we embrace different things.

4. In conservative churches it's usually Jesus + rules.³ *Don't* smoke, drink or chew or go with girls who do. *In liberal churches it's* believe in Jesus and be on the correct side of various social and political issues. *Both* groups do two things wrong: 1) they add a requirement - it is trust Jesus + something; 2) and they get the order wrong.⁴ They base justification on sanctification, instead of the other way around.⁵ And so Paul comes out swinging - at the Judaizers for advocating a different message and at the Galatian Christians for getting suckered.

D. We pick up today with chapter one verse six.

IV. Galatians 1:6: I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you⁶ to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— which is really no gospel at all.

A. The Judaizers argue that Paul was mostly right, they are just making a small change. Paul says the change is not small. It is a game-changer. It turns the real Gospel into a different Gospel – which he will later say is not a Gospel at all.⁷

V. V5: Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. The word *pervert* refers to moving in the opposite direction. It means to reverse the order. Instead of Faith = Salvation + Works, it is Faith + Works = Salvation.

³ What do conservatives do is give some lip service to the idea that justification is acceptance of believers as righteous on the basis of Christ, and sanctification is progress in actual holiness. But in day to day existence in conservative churches most people rely on their sanctification for justification. They draw assurance of acceptance of God from: 1) their sincerity; their past conversion; recent religious activity; and their relative infrequency of deliberate sin. But Christians who are no longer sure that God loves and receives them on the basis of Christ, rely on their performance for their relationship with God. And as a result are radically insecure people. More insecure than non-Christians. Because we have some idea of how holy God is.

⁴ Richard Lovelace: “Only a fraction of the present body of professing Christians are solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives. Many have so light an apprehension of God’s holiness and of the extent and guilt of their sin that consciously they see little need for justification, although below the surface of their lives they are deeply guilt-ridden and insecure. Many others have a theoretical commitment to this doctrine, but in their day-to-day existence they rely on their sanctification for justification, in the Augustinian manner, drawing their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience. Few know enough to start each day with a thoroughgoing stand upon Luther’s platform: you are accepted, looking outward in faith and claiming the wholly alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground for acceptance, relaxing in that quality of trust which will produce increasing sanctification as faith is active in love and gratitude.”

⁵ In their day to day existence, conservative Christians rely on their sanctification for their justification. Drawing their assurance of acceptance of God from their sincerity, their past act of conversion, their recent religious performance, or their relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience. But Christian who are no longer sure that God loves and accepts them in Jesus apart from their spiritual achievements, are subconsciously radically insecure persons, much less secure than non-Christians, because of the constant bulletins they receive from their Christian environment about the holiness of God and the righteousness they are supposed to have. Their insecurity then shows itself in pride, a fierce defense of their assertion of their own righteousness and a defensive criticism of others. They come naturally to hate other cultural styles and races in order to bolster their own insecurity and discharge their suppressed anger. They cling desperately to legal, pharisaical righteousness, but envy, jealousy and all other branches of the tree of sin grow out of that fundamental insecurity.

⁶ Gal. 1:4

⁷ John Stott comments: “You cannot modify or supplement the gospel without radically changing its character...to tamper with the gospel is always to trouble the church. You cannot touch the gospel and leave the church untouched, because the church is created and lives by the gospel. Indeed, the church’s greatest troublemakers (now as then) are not those outside who oppose, ridicule and persecute it, but those inside who try to change the gospel. It is they who trouble the church” (Galatians, p. 23).

VI. 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!⁸ 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!

VII. The term *Gospel* comes up five times in the introduction. What exactly is the Gospel? What exactly, specifically, precisely is the Gospel? The Greek word is *euvangelion* – from which we get our word evangelism. It translates as “good news.” What is the news? Well, a few things are clear: 1) If it is news, it is not advice or insight. Which means it's not something we figure out on our own or discover if we look deep inside ourselves. It is something we need to be told; 2) It is good; and 3) It is something specific – not whatever we may want it to be. Paul is fighting because he believes they got it wrong.⁹ Today we are OK letting people believe whatever they want to believe – as long as they are sincere. And in a pluralistic culture we need to defend people's right to believe whatever they want to believe – even things we strongly disagree with. But, as Christ-followers, we need to be very clear about the specific claims Jesus made. We need to be very clear about the nature of the Gospel. It is not whatever we want it to be.¹⁰ It is not generic religion or Moral Therapeutic Deism.

A. This is one time where close is not close enough.¹¹ Usually I am pretty easy going. People who do not know me outside of this setting, often expect me to have strong opinions about lots of things. And they are surprised to find that I am pretty easy going. I may have an opinion about something, but I don't fight for it. But I am not flexible here. I am trying to walk in lock step with what Jesus and Paul and the other New Testament writers lay out.

VIII. What is the Gospel? How are we saved? What do we need to do to be right with God? Justified? Adopted into His family? Live after we die? In I Peter 1:12 we are told that the angels long to look at the Gospel because it is so amazing. What are they amazed at?

⁸ I'll say more about this in a future message, but it's clear that Paul places the Gospel over his authority, over personal experience, over the church. It doesn't matter who says otherwise.

⁹ People in churches are free to disagree over all kinds of things: various types of conduct, form of baptism, aspects of church government, dress code, the color of the carpet and more. We can expect disagreement, but hopefully there are no fights. There should not be. But when it comes to the Gospel you cannot tolerate a different view. Close is not close enough. If for no other reason, if you try to change the Gospel just a bit, you turn it completely inside out. There is no spectrum. Martin Luther says, “There is no middle ground between Christian righteousness and works righteousness. The gospel is about a particular order. It is: God loves you and as a result, you love him. It is not: you love God and come to him and as a result He loves you. There is nothing in the middle. And Paul says, as soon as you move it a bit you go all the way.

¹⁰ About ten years ago, *Christianity Today* began The Gospel Project, and as part of it they had an article celebrating the Gospel. It opens by stating that, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the best and most important news that any human being ever hears. It declares the only way to know God in peace, love and joy.” It then spent five pages trying to carefully define the word because there is some confusion and disagreement here.

¹¹ Paul was willing to be flexible on several things (foods, holy days, etc. – see Rom 14-15 and I Cor. 8 – 10), but he was not flexible on the Gospel.

A. Let me start by noting that the Gospel is expressed in a number of different ways in the Bible.¹² Different metaphors are used, it is described from different vantage points. In fact, although there is only one Gospel,¹³ in chapter 2 of Galatians, Paul contrasts the Gospel of the Gentiles with the Gospel of the Jews.¹⁴ And when you dig into that, you see that people who grow up with the Law (like the Jews) often relate to a Gospel presentation that defines our problem as sin that cuts us off from God's holiness. Whereas those who are less religious often relate more readily to the Gospel as way to counter our tendency to find our worth on things other than God, or on our collective failure to address racism, poverty, injustice or more systemic issues.¹⁵

IX. What is the Gospel? Well, I think we need to start by letting the Bible speak for itself.

A. Given that we are studying Galatians, we should note that Paul crams the answerer into his opening of the letter. Verse 3 reads: 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,

B. Of course the first four chapters of Romans are also key. Paul opens Romans by announcing that he is not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to all who believe, and then proceeds to spell it out.

C. In 2 Cor. 5:21 we are told that God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

D. In Ephesians 2:8 & 9 we read that it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.

¹² Over the years it has been common to describe it as a pool in which a toddler can wade and yet an elephant can swim.

¹³ Galatians 1:8

¹⁴ Gal. 2:7

¹⁵ In his article for ACTS 29, "Tim Keller Explains the Gospel," Keller writes: Just as Paul spoke about a gospel for the more religious (the "circumcised") and for the pagan, so I've found that my audience in Manhattan contains both those with moralist, religious backgrounds as well as those with postmodern, pluralistic worldviews. There are people from other religions (Judaism, Islam), people with strong Catholic backgrounds, as well as those raised in conservative Protestant churches. People with a religious upbringing can grasp the idea of sin as the violation of God's moral law. That law can be explained in such a way that they realize they fall short of it. In that context, Christ and his salvation can be presented as the only hope of pardon for guilt. This, the traditional evangelical gospel of the last generation, is a "gospel for the circumcised." However, Manhattan is also filled with postmodern listeners who consider all moral statements to be culturally relative and socially constructed. If you try to convict them of guilt for sexual lust, they will simply say, "You have your standards, and I have mine." If you respond with a diatribe on the dangers of relativism, your listeners will simply feel scolded and distanced. Of course, postmodern people must at some point be challenged about their mushy views of truth, but there is a way to make a credible and convicting gospel presentation to them even before you get into such apologetic issues. I take a page from Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death* and define sin as building your identity-your self-worth and happiness-on anything other than God. That is, I use the biblical definition of sin as idolatry. That puts the emphasis not as much on "doing bad things" but on "making good things into ultimate things." Instead of telling them they are sinning because they are sleeping with their girlfriends or boyfriends, I tell them that they are sinning because they are looking to their romances to give their lives meaning, to justify and save them, to give them what they should be looking for from God. This idolatry leads to anxiety, obsessiveness, envy, and resentment. I have found that when you describe their lives in terms of idolatry, postmodern people do not give much resistance. Then Christ and his salvation can be presented not (at this point) so much as their only hope for forgiveness, but as their only hope for freedom. This is my "gospel for the uncircumcised."

E. John 3:16: For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

F. I Corinthians 15:1: Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you... ³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.

G. Some who hear this list will argue that I am cherry-picking verses – that I am thinking too individualistically, acting like an American and leaving out those passages that talk about what God is going to do to fight injustice and remake the world. I am sympathetic to that. I think the Gospel is big, big, big. But there is a basic message that is primary and we need to lock in on. And that is what I am focused on here because I think that is what Paul is focused on with the Galatians.¹⁶

H. And that simple Gospel argues that Jesus took our place; that we are more wicked than we dare to imagine, but more loved by God and accepted in Christ than we ever dare believe. My statement of the basic Gospel defines it as: the loving activity of God – and God alone - by which we can be forgiven, redeemed, adopted into his family and sanctified.

X. With that as a starting place, let me supplement it with eight additional comments.

A. One: The Good News assumes bad news. The Gospel starts with the premise that we are broken and dead. We are not called sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners. The things we do wrong – telling lies, failing to help someone in need – are less problems than symptoms. I think it's safe to say that the Bible has a lower view of us than virtually any other worldview. We were made in the image of God, we are highly valued and greatly loved, but we are deeply fallen and incapable of doing good.

1. The average person on the streets believes that they are doing pretty well. They also think that a Christian is someone who follows Christ's teaching and example. Paul implies that that is impossible. We are not able to do that. We are too bad to pull it off.¹⁷

B. We are too broken to help in our rescue. The Gospel not only claims that everything that needs to be done for us to be right with God has been done by Christ. It also claims that this is a good thing because we are too broken to do anything.

1. Jesus is a teacher and example, but he is less than He is a Savior. The message we get is that when He sees us drowning, He doesn't throw us a book on how to swim, He jumps in to save us.

2. Let me illustrate it this way. Pelagianism: chart A; Semi-Pelagianism: chart B; The Gospel: chart C

¹⁶ In Romans 2:16, Paul implies that Christ's return to judge the earth was part of his Gospel, and Psalm 96:10 implies as much. A fuller version of the Gospel reminds us that God created both the material and spiritual and is going to redeem both. But I am focused on a simple, basic presentation of the Gospel today.

¹⁷ This is not fun to hear, although it's helpful. Hey, it's annoying to be underestimated, but it can be deadly to be overestimated. So let's get it straight. Let's face the bad news. We are in real trouble – beyond our ability to help ourselves.

C. Number Three: Our salvation is an instantaneous event. It's not uncommon to talk about becoming a Christian as if it is a process. And there can be a bit of process to it. There was for me. It took close to two years, and I am not sure of the moment I stepped over the line. But there is a moment. Becoming a Christian is not like learning to read or swim - that you do for a while until you develop a proficiency. Being a Christian is more like the cliché of being pregnant. You either are or you aren't. It may feel like a process, but there is a moment when new life begins. Our sin is transferred to Christ and his righteousness is transferred to us and we are sealed with the Holy Spirit.

D. Four: Saying that we are saved by grace alone does not mean our works do not matter. You may think that that is what you heard me say. But I didn't. I have been arguing that the equation is: Faith = Salvation + Works, not: Faith + Works = Salvation. But please hear. It is also not: Faith = Salvation. We do not contribute to our salvation. But real faith changes us and it confirms that we have stepped over the line.

1. James makes this point when he writes, faith without works is dead. Faith that does not lead to serving, giving, a change of heart, is not true faith.

2. We get a similar argument from Paul in Eph. 2:10. Immediately after he writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing..." he says, "we are...created in Christ Jesus for good works"¹⁸

3. If you have been a Christ follower for a while, you should be able to look back and see evidence of your changed life. It may be hard to see it happening in real time, though others may notice it. But you should be able to see it when you look back. You should surprise yourself from time to time.¹⁹ "Wow, I've changed."

E. Five: Our experience should be that even as we become better, we realize that we are more broken than we thought.

1. When we first come to faith, we likely realize that we have fallen short of God's standards and we need help. Chart. We will call the gap grace is expected to fill X. As we walk with God we realize that God is so much bigger than we realized, and our brokenness is so much greater than some sins we commit, that we need 100X grace.

2. Indeed, at some point you should start to think that most people are better than you are. If you think you are better than the non-Christians you are sharing the Gospel with, I wonder if you really understand the Gospel.

3. Why would you be better? Why would you assume that you are a better friend, husband / wife, employer than they are. Sure, some non-Christians are immoral but some try very hard to be good.

¹⁸ Jethani writes: Returning to Jesus' parable in Matthew 25, it is clear that the King judges the sheep and goats based on their good works. What remains unclear is whether those works are the *basis* for their salvation or merely the *evidence* of it. Klyne Snodgrass notes, "[The parable] warns that judgment will be determined by acts of mercy, but does not address whether this mercy is the result of redemption or its cause." The ambiguity is important. Without it we might be tempted to dismiss either right belief or obedience as unessential. Bonhoeffer explains their unity this way: "The truth is that so long as we hold both sides of the proposition together they contain nothing inconsistent with right belief, but as soon as one is divorced from the other, it is bound to prove a stumbling block. 'Only those who believe obey' is what we say to that part of a believer's soul which obeys, and 'only those who obey believe' is what we say to that part of the soul of the obedient which believes. If the first half of the proposition stands alone, the believer is exposed to the danger of cheap grace, which is another word for damnation. If the second half stands alone, the believer is exposed to the danger of salvation through works, which is also another word for damnation."

¹⁹ If being a Christ-follower was illegal, there should be enough evidence from your life for you to be arrested.

4. The Gospel should make me more and more aware of how deeply broken we are.

F. Six: If you have come to faith in Christ, I expect that at some point you should have had an experience of being shocked by the Gospel. Scandalized. Because the offer is better than you thought. We start with the believe and behave mindset. We start at Moral Therapeutic Deists. At some point we need to be shocked by the actual love and grace of God.

1. The way this often works out is that people will say, “I grew up in a church but never heard the Gospel until... I went to another church or Young Life or whatever.” And the suggestion is, that church they grew up in did not do a good job of getting the Gospel in front of people. Maybe. That happens.

2. But just as often the issue is, we don’t hear what is being said. But when we do we think: are you kidding me? There is hearing then there is hearing

G. Seven: The Gospel is not just for non-Christians. I used to think that once we came to faith, we were done with the Gospel. It was milk. We needed to move on to the meat. But the Gospel is milk and meat dessert. We never get past it.

1. It is not that we come to faith by grace and then grow ourselves spiritually through self-effort. It’s all grace. Paul wrote Galatians for Christians. Later in his letter to the Galatians, Paul says that any growth in the Christian life is the fruit of the Spirit in you. The power of the Spirit is released by faith in Christ, not by resolution or self-discipline. Sanctification is God’s work just as much as justification.²⁰

H. Finally, having spent all of this time focused on the Gospel, I want to say to you, do not marvel at the Gospel, marvel at Jesus. In Michael Reeves’s book, *Rejoicing in Christ*, he writes something I think is worth citing in full.

1. We naturally gravitate, it seems, to anything but Jesus – and Christians almost as much as anyone. Whether it’s “the Christian worldview,” “grace,” “the Bible,” or “the gospel,” as if they were things in themselves that could save us. Even “the cross” can get abstracted from Jesus, as if the wood had some power of its own. Other things, wonderful things, vital concepts, beautiful discoveries so easily edge Jesus aside. Precious theological concepts meant to describe him and his work get treated as things in their own right. He becomes just another brick in the wall. But the center, the cornerstone, the jewel in the crown of Christianity is not an idea, a system or a thing; it is not even “the gospel” as such. It is Jesus Christ.

XI. We are going to close today with a song – *All My Hope is Found in Jesus*. I stumbled onto this song a couple months ago, and did something very uncharacteristic for me – I listened to it over and over and over again. I found it a powerful expression of the Gospel, which we all need – some to embrace for the first time, and some of us to lean back into. This song spoke to me and so I asked that it be played at all of the campuses. “Father, meet with us now. Help us know your grace.”

XII. David Crowder song: *All My Hope*

XIII. Campus Pastors:

²⁰ “It is very common in the church to think as follows. ‘The gospel is for non-Christians. One needs it to be saved. But once saved, you grow through hard work and obedience.’ But Col.1:6 shows that this is a mistake. Both confession and ‘hard work’ that is not arising from and ‘in line’ with the gospel will not sanctify you—it will strangle you. All our problems come from a failure to apply the gospel. Thus when Paul left the Ephesians he committed them ‘to the word of his grace, which can build you up’ (Acts 20:32)” Tim Keller

- A. I opened the service quoting from William Holland's journal, which talked about the breakthrough Holland had listening to Wesley read the preface of Martin Luther's commentary on Galatians. Maybe you have had your own eureka moment today. I hope so.
- B. Mike mentioned that we all need grace – some for the first time, what we can “saving grace,” and so I am going to give you a chance to pray for that. And some need to lean back into God's grace. To get the order right – not Faith + Work = Salvation, which means we are thinking it's about our effort, but to realize that it's faith (trust in God) that leads to Salvation + Works.
- C. PRAYER for salvation / for Grace.
- D. Announcements