

## **The Right Road Matters**

### *Galatians 1:1-9*

My freshmen year of college I attended a Christian conference in Fort Worth, TX over the Christmas break. I went down with a group of students from Kearney State College in Nebraska. On the return trip I remember waking up from a nap late in the afternoon and I noticed that the sun was shining through our back window. If you are traveling from Texas to Nebraska the sun should not be shining in the back window. I pointed that out to the driver and eventually we realized that instead of being on I-135, we were on I-35 headed to Emporia. Emporia is fine and all, but it wasn't where we wanted to go.

South of Wichita our driver, Mark, should have gotten on I-135, but instead he stayed on I-35. It was just a subtle thing at first; he was in one lane and not the other. But that error of being in one lane and not the other got us off track and it led to a very different destination. Being on the right road matters.

This morning we are starting a study of Galatians. This is a letter that it has had a significant influence on what road Christianity would travel. It helped keep Christianity on the right road in the first century. It helped return Christianity to the right road in the Protestant Reformation. And in our day, the message of this letter is just as critical for us today in keeping traveling the right spiritual road.

Many believe that this letter is one of the earliest of the New Testament books written around 52 AD. In 52 AD the church is not even yet 20 years old yet. It is still in infancy. This letter addresses the first great doctrinal crisis of the Church. The church had come to a cross-roads. Which road would it travel?

This doctrinal crisis arose in the early days when the Gospel went from being preached by Jews to Jews out into areas that were predominately Gentile. As Gentiles came to faith in Christ questions began to arise that were never considered when it existed only in a Jewish context. Questions like: Must a Gentile follow the law of Moses to be a Christian? Is there a need to follow Judaism as a system? In this letter Paul forcefully addresses these questions.

Paul had established churches in Galatia during his second missionary journey. Sometime later Jewish teachers came and began to teach that the Gentiles needed to adopt Judaism as a system to be a Christian. They came to fill out what they believed was lacking in Paul's teaching. They argued that Paul did not have it all right.

As we read this letter, we can make some assumptions about what the Jewish teachers were saying about Paul and his message. First, they claimed that Paul was not an apostle. He had not lived with Jesus, nor was he one of the twelve. And so therefore since he was not an apostle, secondly, his Gospel was not the true Gospel or at least the complete Gospel. Finally, they were also teaching that the Gospel Paul taught led to loose living. If the law is taken away, clearly sin and immoral living would increase.

Paul counters each of these arguments in this letter and in doing so he helps us stay on the right road of the gospel of grace.

This morning we are going to look at the first nine verses of Galatians. The first thing we see is that . . .

**I. We know the right road because Paul speaks with the authority of Christ (vv. 1-2)**

<sup>1</sup> *Paul, an apostle (not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead),*  
<sup>2</sup> *and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia:*

In nine of the thirteen letters that Paul wrote in the New Testament, he states that he is an apostle. And so there is nothing unusual about this affirmation. What is unusual, however, is the time he spends here addressing how he became an apostle. This is a critical issue, because if Paul is an apostle then he speaks with the authority of Christ.

As I mentioned, Paul's opponents in Galatia were saying that he was not really an apostle. In their minds, he didn't meet the requirements. Apparently, they were saying that he was just a representative of men; sent *through the agency of man*. At stake was the question of Paul's authority.

But Paul says that he was not *sent from men nor through the agency of man*. Rather, he was sent *through Jesus Christ, and God the Father*. He will go into great detail on this in the next chapter, but right from the start of this letter Paul argues that his commission was from the Lord. He had met Jesus on the Damascus road and it was Jesus who had sent him as an apostle.

And so, Paul, speaking with the authority of an apostle, along with *all the brethren who are with [him]* writes to *the churches of Galatia*. He is not just writing to one church, he is writing to a group of churches that were located in what is modern day Turkey.

I would assume that for most of us, we don't question that Paul was an apostle. We don't doubt that he was sent by Christ. And so we don't wrestle with questions of Paul's authority in the same way the Galatians did. But I wonder if maybe we might need to be reminded that this letter from Paul, as well as all of his letters, as well as all of the Scriptures are authoritative in our lives.

People like Paul, who were sent from God have spoken and written with Christ's authority. What we have here (i.e. in the Bible) are not just good ideas and suggestions from inspirational people, but rather this is God's Word to us and it speaks with absolute authority into our lives. Is that how you view the Scriptures?

If we want to stay on the right spiritual road we need to allow the Scriptures to speak with authority into our lives. We need to believe what they teach and obey what they say.

Paul goes on next to say that . . .

## II. **We travel the right road when we stand on a Gospel based solely on the work of Christ (vv.3-5)**

In these next verses, Paul, in the standard form of an ancient letter, expresses a good wish for his readers. In this wish he begins to flesh out the nature of the message that he preached.

<sup>3</sup> *Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ,*  
<sup>4</sup> *who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us out of this*  
*present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, <sup>5</sup> to whom be*  
*the glory forevermore. Amen.*

Paul's wish for them is *grace* and *peace*. But not just any grace and peace; he wants them to experience grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. These are things that are found in the fullest sense from God specifically through Jesus Christ and what he did for us.

What did Jesus do for the Galatians, and us, according to Paul? He *gave himself for our sins*. We are the sinful ones. We have erred and disobeyed God and Romans 6:23 says that the wages of sin is death. We have earned God's judgment for our sin. And yet, Christ took our place. He gave His own life to pay the penalty of our sin. He took upon himself the punishment that we rightly deserve. In these words, Paul begins to articulate one of the great doctrines of the Christian faith - the substitutionary death of Christ. What we have earned and deserved, Christ took. He was our substitute. Grace and peace is rooted in the substitutionary death of Christ.

The purpose for which Jesus did this, Paul says, is *that He might deliver us out of this present evil age*. This present age does not mean a certain period of time in history, but rather it is a way of life that is opposed to God. It is a way of life that is lived apart from Christ and which is under the control of sin and the influence of a very real devil. It is an age that Paul says is *evil*. Christ gave himself to deliver us from this; not in the sense of removing us from it, but rather the emphasis here is on rescuing us from the power of this age.

All of this, Paul says, was *according to the will of God*. This salvation; this deliverance was not based on the merits of man, but on the initiative and action of God. And so grace and peace is rooted in the activity of God; not man's merits. If the Galatians were to move away from the Gospel of grace they would also be moving away from the peace that is found there. And they would be heading down a road that ultimately did not deliver them from sin.

When we travel this road based solely on the work of Christ, we will experience this peace and we will find deliverance from this present evil age as well. I don't think I have to tell you that we to be delivered. We live in this same *present evil age* that the Galatians did. We live in an age that is opposed to God and His ways and which seeks to shape us in a way that is contrary to what God wants for us. This present age is not neutral. It is evil. Every day as we engage this world, it seeks to form and shape us and get us to live in ways that do not honor God. Paul warns us about that in Romans 12:2 when he says to not be conformed to this world but be transformed.

The message of the gospel of grace is that Christ gave himself for our sin that he might deliver us from the power of this age. Because of Christ we really can live for God. We really can put away sin and obey God from the heart. Because of Christ we can experience true grace and peace. This is the road that we must stay on - this road based solely on the work of Christ. Just like it was vital for the Galatians to cling to the truth of this message so too for us.

And so, . . .

### **III. We must be careful to not add anything to the Gospel of grace (vv. 6-9)**

Paul had heard reports that the Galatians were apparently beginning to walk a different road not based completely on his Gospel. They were being swayed from the truth of his message. And so he expresses his strong concern in these next verses.

At this point in an ancient letter a writer would typically express some kind of thanksgiving for something about his recipients. Paul does this in most of his other letters (see Rom., 1 & 2 Cor., Eph., Phil., Col, 1 & 2 Thess.). Even to the Corinthians, a church where Paul has to address all kinds of problems and sin issues, he expresses thanksgiving for things he has seen God do in them. Paul is like a boxer who can't wait to charge out of his corner and get to the fight. He says:

*<sup>6</sup> I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; <sup>7</sup> which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ.*

Do you get the sense that Paul is a little stirred up? He can't believe that so soon after coming to faith in Christ, they are *deserting* God. Notice that he says that they were not just turning away from an idea or a set of principles, they were deserting the very One who had called them by *the grace of Christ, for a different gospel*. The way he says this suggests that they were in the very act of turning away right now, which means that there is still hope of turning them back.

The message that Paul had taught them was *the gospel of Christ*. It was not based on human merit. But the gospel of those who were *disturbing* them was a gospel of human

merit. It was a gospel of obeying the law of Moses. It was a gospel of following the Jewish system. Paul says that to turn to that gospel is to desert the One who had called them.

Most commentators believe that these teachers who were *disturbing* them were Jewish Christians. They were not evil people seeking to willfully turn people away from the truth. As Jewish Christians, who had followed the law of Moses as a people for hundreds of years, they simply could not fathom that all of that should be laid aside. It seems that in their minds the message that they taught was simply something that complemented Paul's teaching. It sort of was the "rest of the story." But Paul says that it is not something that complements his Gospel, rather it is a *different gospel*. But he goes on to clarify that the gospel of the Jewish teachers is really is not another gospel. There is only one gospel.

He goes on:

*<sup>8</sup> But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. <sup>9</sup> As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.*

Paul's point here is that ultimately the gospel message is what is important. His own authority, or the authority claimed by these Jewish teachers, was secondary to the gospel. Even if angels would come from heaven and preach a message contrary to what they had taught, they would be wrong.

Notice that he uses the word *contrary* twice in verses 8 and 9. The NIV says "other," but that is not a strong enough term because the word has an adversative sense. It has the sense of "against." His point is that the message of the false teachers was not just something that was complementary to what Paul taught. Rather it was a message that was completely contrary to Paul's message. It was a different thing altogether.

Anyone who preaches a message contrary to what he had preached - and he includes himself in this - he says *let him be accursed*. He says it twice. The one who teaches a contrary gospel let him be condemned by God.

These are strong words of rebuke. It is a slap in the Galatians face to wake them up to the truth. Paul speaks with such great passion because of what is at stake. At stake was the faith of the Galatians. And ultimately what was at stake was the future of the Christian movement. Maybe the additions of the Jewish teachers seemed like a small thing to some. It was simply being in one lane of that road and not the other. But it really isn't that different right? Not to Paul. The gospel of the Jewish teachers was a totally different road. It was a road that would lead to Emporia, not Kearney. If you add anything to the gospel of grace it is a totally different thing. We must be careful to not add anything to the Gospel of grace

In our day there are messages and there are teachers out there that want to add to this gospel of grace as well. I would even say that there is something in us that really doesn't like that it is all by grace. We want to have a part. We want to earn it. Yes, you need Christ, but you also need to do \_\_\_\_\_. But if we add anything to this gospel of grace, it is not the gospel at all. It is a different road.

As I was growing up, there were things that I added to the work of Christ. I believed that I needed Christ. I trusted that He died on the cross for me to forgive my sin. But I also felt that I needed to live a good life to truly merit salvation. The unspoken equation of salvation in my mind was faith + good life = salvation. It was the gospel of grace, plus something.

During my freshman year in college I met some other believers with whom I began to study the Bible and I began to understand that what I was believing was a distortion of the gospel. I was adding things to the work of Christ. I saw clearly for the first time that the gospel totally a message of grace. Christ gave himself for my sin and if I believed in that I was forgiven and saved. I stopped trusting in the gospel, plus my efforts and started trusting in Christ alone. I started traveling the right road. And when I did that I really began to grow. I began to experience Christ setting me free from the power of this present evil age to live how God wanted me to.

Are you trusting in the work of Christ alone for your salvation? If you are adding anything to his finished work, any kind of human merit, you are off the right road. You are not traveling the road that delivers you from this present evil age and you are forfeiting the grace and peace that are found only Christ. And you are forfeiting the life transforming power that is found only in this gospel of grace.

We need to be careful to stay on the right road by not adding ANYTHING to the work of Christ.

The message of today's passage and the message that we are going to hear over and over again in this book is that the gospel that saves and the gospel that transforms is a gospel of grace. It is not a gospel of works. My encouragement to all of you, whether you've been a Christian for 50 years, or one year, or are maybe still exploring is to invite God to speak to you afresh about this message of grace. Ask God to either for the first time or in a fresh way again to put your feet firmly on this road of grace.

The right road matters.