

## **Preaching the Gospel**

*preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on May 5, 2019*

This morning we are beginning a short sermon series on Paul's letter to the Galatians. Written around 49 A.D., about one year before the historic Jerusalem Council, this letter addressed the most pressing controversy in the early church, which was the status of the Law of Moses in the emerging Christian community.

And now turning to God's Word, we will be reading from Galatians, chapter one, verses three through ten.

Galatians 1:3-10

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. 6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - 7 not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! 9 As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed! 10 Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Like all letters ever written, whether recent or ancient, secular or sacred, in order to understand what is being said it is important that the reader be familiar with the times and the culture of the author. Thus, as we try today to understand what the Apostle Paul was saying in this morning's reading, and as we try to understand the message of Galatians over the next few weeks, it is important that we consider how the church had evolved from the time of its inception when Christ rose from the grave to the time Paul wrote Galatians nearly twenty years later.

Reflecting on the matter, as St. Luke tells us in the book of Acts, the story of the church began in Jerusalem. Having emerged from the Jewish people, and the Jewish religion, that had its own history going back thousands of years, God began a new work, beginning with Jesus, whom He raised from the dead.

This new work began to sprout when Jesus showed himself to his disciples on the Mount of Olives. Then, the new community Jesus initiated became the seventy in the Upper Room, and then three thousand on the day of Pentecost. By Acts, chapter six, the church had expanded to include Jews who belonged to the ranks of the Hellenists, Hebrews, Priests, and Pharisees; all of whom now believed that Jesus was the Son of God, whom God had raised from the dead, and that forgiveness of sins was attained through belief in him.

By Acts, chapter eight, the church entered new territory as the gospel was embraced by Samaritans and by the Ethiopian Eunuch. Shortly after this, the Holy Spirit fell upon a Roman Centurion named Cornelius and his family and friends, and they too became followers of Jesus.

Then, in Acts, chapter eleven a large number of Gentiles in the city of Antioch, in the region of Galatia, became followers of Jesus. It was at this time that Jesus' disciples became known as Christians. While all of this was going on, a conflict arose as men from Judea went down to Antioch and taught the new Gentile converts that being a Christian meant they must be circumcised and follow all the laws of Moses.

Naturally, this news was not well received by the Gentile converts in Antioch and they sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem in order to consult with the elders of the church regarding this matter. The gathering to which Paul and Barnabus went is known as the Jerusalem Council.

This story, which is told in Acts chapter fifteen, marks the turning point in the book of Acts, and it is one of the defining moments in church history. The reason this council was so critical to how the church evolved was it decisively dealt with the issue of how Gentile believers would be integrated into a church that was ethnically and culturally Jewish.

At the end of the day, the conclusion of the council was that the church should not impose Jewish customs on Gentile believers. In my opinion, this decision, more than anything else, is what paved the way for the explosive growth of the church throughout the world; (speaking from a human perspective.) It was this decision that took a movement that was 100% Jewish at its inception and allowed it to become a community that would be populated by every tribe, nation, and tongue in the world even by the end of the first century.

With this background information mind, let us turn to today's reading. In verse six, Paul commented that he was astonished that the Galatians were turning away from the gospel that he had preached among them. What did he mean by this? What he meant was there were Jews in their midst, especially those in Antioch, (which again was a city located in the region of Galatia), who were telling the newly converted Christians that the pathway to God, that the way of salvation, that the gift of eternal life, was to be found by believing in Jesus and by following the Law of Moses.

What was happening among the Galatians was that they were being taught that Christ's sacrifice on the cross was not sufficient to atone for their sins, and to purify them, but that the animal sacrifices prescribed in the Jewish religion were still necessary to accomplish these things. In Paul's absence there were Jewish teachers in the church telling the new Gentile converts that Christ's sinless life, and perfect sacrifice were not sufficient to merit their adoption into the family of God, but, that their own works of righteousness, as determined by the Law of Moses, were also required.

This was the different gospel that Paul reported was being preached among the Galatians. This was the different gospel, that Paul stated was no gospel. And for good reason. Because the Law is impossible to keep. And if our salvation depends upon us keeping the Law, then we are all lost. However, as Paul taught the Galatians, all that the Law requires of us, Christ has achieved on our behalf.

For when Christ died on the cross, the full restitution for all our sins: past, present, and future was made. When Christ died on the cross, his blood purified us, making us clean, making us worthy to stand in the presence of God and making us worthy to be adopted as children of God. When Christ died on the cross, his act of righteous devotion, that fully embodied the spirit of the burnt sacrifices and the grain sacrifices of the Old Testament Law, became our righteousness by which we have gained favour in the eyes of God. When Christ died on the cross, he fulfilled all the Law and the Prophets, he became our peace offering, which is the fulfillment of the fifth and final sacrifice, that foreshadows the time when we shall dwell in the presence of God, on the mountain of the Lord, surrounded by the people of God, dwelling in joy and in peace.

This was the gospel that Paul preached to the Galatians, in the power of the Holy Spirit, with signs, and with wonders, demonstrating the resurrection power of Christ that is available to all believers in the present life, and that will raise us to eternal life in the age to come. This gospel, Paul taught the Galatians, was a gift of grace, freely offered by our generous God to all: whether male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile. All we have to do is to believe, to ask, and to receive. That is it. This was the gospel that Paul preached.

Yet, to his dismay, Paul noted in our reading this morning, that under the apostate teaching of certain Jews in their midst, many of the Galatians were abandoning the way of freedom for the way of slavery; many of them were abandoning the way of life for the way of death. In making these statements, Paul used some harsh language that we are not used to hearing in polite company and so we may read the words that he wrote in Galatians chapter one and find ourselves taken aback.

After all, it is not our custom to curse people in church. In the NIV, Paul commands that the false teachers be “eternally condemned.” These are hardly the words we normally use during our weekly Sunday worship. So why does Paul use them in his letter to the Galatians.

In response to this question a few reasons come to mind. As stated in the background information which I provided at the beginning of the sermon, the decision of the church not to impose Jewish customs on Gentile believers was one of the most important decisions made in the history of the church. In other words, had Paul, and the other church leaders who convened at the Jerusalem Council not prevailed on the matter at hand, the Christian church would have likely died in infancy or at best remained a small sect within a small religion.

When framed from this perspective it is easier to see how this matter was a really, really, big deal and why Paul reacted so strongly to the issue. After all, he was literally laying his life on the line day in and day out, year in and year out in order to advance the gospel of Christ, while those whom he condemned were literally sowing seeds of destruction that would kill all he had sacrificed his life to build in a very short period of time. When viewed from this perspective, its no wonder he used such strong language.

However, there was a more important reason for his choice of words. And it simply comes down to this. Those whom Paul condemned were cursed because they had cursed Jesus. For in their insistence that human works are required to justify the sinner to God, they denounced the person and ministry of Christ himself. And anyone who denounces the person and ministry of Christ is not filled with the Spirit of God, but, they are filled with the spirit of him who seeks to destroy the works of God in this world.

Stated a little more diplomatically, the gospel that Paul preached and the gospel preached by the false teachers were mutually exclusive. In other words, if one was right, by definition, the other had to be wrong. If one was blessed, then the other by definition had to be cursed. Furthermore, in such matters, no middle ground or compromise could be reached. Either Christ is sufficient or he is not. This was not a matter that was open for debate. If it was, then the battle would have already been lost. This is why Paul strongly condemned the false teachers. At the critical junction that would define the church not just in the first century, but, for twenty centuries to come, there was no room for error.

And I would argue the same is true today. As a church the foundation upon which we stand is the person and ministry of Jesus. Without a resolute conviction on these matters we will not stand. Given our tendency to waver on most matters of faith, this can be a troubling reality to contemplate. However, the good news we can count on going forward is that Christ will build his church. This he has demonstrated through the ages, preserving the church in its infancy, especially at the time of the Jerusalem Council, and empowering it in every stage of its development, as amply demonstrated in the book of Acts, and throughout church history.

Thus, armed with this hope, let us continue to ponder the words God inspired through the Apostle Paul from our Scripture reading this morning, and as we do, may God's Spirit deepen our conviction that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. May God's Spirit renew within us a sense of awe and wonder, and humility and gratitude as we remember Christ's all sufficient sacrifice for us when he died on the cross. And as we reflect on who Christ is and what he has done for us may we continually open ourselves to receive his grace and be sustained in our daily living through the Spirit he has poured upon us. Amen.