

“So That the Truth of the Gospel Might Be Preserved”

The Second in a Series of Sermons on the Book of Galatians

Texts: Galatians 1:10-2:14; Isaiah 49:1-7

Paul’s personal calling from the Risen and Ascended Jesus was to preach the same gospel which Jesus revealed to him. As Paul now understands, he was set apart by Jesus and called by God’s grace for this very task. In fulfilling that call the Apostle founded a number of churches in Galatia, preaching the gospel of Christ crucified throughout the region. But soon after his departure from the area, the gospel was under full assault, prompting Paul to write his epistle to the Galatians, one of the most direct and confrontational letters in the New Testament.

Last time, we worked our way through the opening verses of the Book of Galatians (vv. 1-9) which is, as we saw, Paul’s response to a serious situation developing in Galatia. Paul will describe how he had preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Galatians previously, publically placarding Jesus Christ before their very eyes (3:1). But shortly after he departed the area, a group of false teachers, known as Judaizers, gained a foothold in these same churches. Teaching that in order to be justified (regarded as “right” before God), that in addition to placing one’s faith in Jesus, Gentile converts also must submit to circumcision and keep certain elements of the ceremonial law just as the Judaizers were doing. In other words, Gentile believers must believe in Jesus, but live as Jews. Paul’s gospel of Christ crucified was very disconcerting to these false teachers since it removes all place for human merit and good works as a ground of being declared “righteous” before God (“justified”). This “different gospel” which the Judaizers were teaching was in reality “no gospel.” Paul opposed them with everything in him.

In responding to the false teaching and accusations of the Judaizers, Paul sets out four points for the Galatians to consider in Galatians 1:10-2:14. **First**, Paul speaks of the origin of the Gospel he preaches. **Second**, he describes the nature of his call as apostle to the Gentiles. **Third**, Paul recounts his life as a Jew and explains his zeal for the religion of his fathers. **Finally**, he describes his two prior visits to Jerusalem and his dealings with the apostles, Peter, James and John, along with the rise of the Judaizing heresy, culminating in Paul confronting Peter about the latter’s apparent acceptance of this heresy.

We begin with verses 10-12, and Paul’s first point of defense. The gospel of Christ crucified is not a figment of his imagination. The gospel which Paul preached was personally revealed to him by Jesus. Amazed at the speed at which the Galatians had been taken in by these false teachers, Paul offers a lament of sorts, asking “*am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.*”

The gospel is centered in the objective and historical work of Jesus Christ *for us*; his life, death, burial, and resurrection according to the Scriptures as in 1 Corinthians 15:1-9. In Romans 1:16-17, the gospel is defined in terms of the revelation of the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ. If preaching the gospel is recounting the facts of redemption, the charge of novelty made against Paul collapses since the facts surrounding Christ’s death and resurrection were common knowledge. Given the offence of the gospel and its character as a stumbling block to the Jew and foolishness to the Gentile (cf. I Corinthians 1:23), Paul could hardly be preaching this message in order to gain favor with men. He himself at one time had

opposed the new sect of “Christians” with great zeal.

At the time of his conversion (recounted in Acts 9), the message he was to preach was revealed to him by none other than Jesus himself. As Paul puts it in Galatians 1:16, “*God was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles.*” God also confirms this call through the ministry of Ananias, and later, the other apostles, who confirm the content of Paul’s gospel. This is why Paul can say in 1 Corinthians 15:1-3 that the Gospel that he preached to the Corinthians, is “what I received and delivered to you.” The word Paul uses, (*paralambano*, “receive”), is a word which the Rabbis used to describe the transmission of sacred tradition. Paul’s call to this apostolic office in which the content of the gospel was revealed to him by the Lord, was also confirmed and fleshed out in more detail by Paul’s later contact with the other apostles.

There was much for Paul to learn from the original apostles, such as the historical facts of the gospel found in the content of the sermons recorded in the first eight chapters of Acts, and likely passed on to Paul by Peter during Paul’s 15 day stay with him, some three years after Paul’s conversion (see 1:18 and 1 Corinthians 15:3 ff.). In addition, there was our Lord’s own teaching which had certainly been memorized and passed on to others. One New Testament scholar has pointed out that there are over “twenty-five instances where Paul certainly or probably makes reference or allusion to a saying of Jesus. In addition, [there are] over forty possible echoes of a saying of Jesus . . . distributed throughout all of the Pauline letters.”¹ After Jesus Christ appeared to him, the primary source of Paul’s thinking about the Messiah was the Old Testament, the lens through which Paul viewed the work of Christ. Old Testament images and phraseology (echoes) are in the background of virtually everything Paul teaches and writes.² This mitigates the false assertion made by critical scholars that Paul had little, if any, first-hand knowledge of Jesus, hence, the ill-informed contention that Paul is the founder of Christianity.

The second line of defense taken by Paul is found in verses 13-14, where Paul recounts his own personal history as both a persecutor of the church and a young buck who was rapidly advancing in Judaism. “*For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.*” The term used here, “to persecute,” comes from a word which means to pursue or hunt down. Paul advanced in Judaism as a trailblazer, relentlessly pursuing all those whom he regards as enemies of the religion of Israel.³ Saul of Tarsus’ personal ambition was to cut-down all opposition to Judaism, exceeding his contemporaries in his zeal for the faith.

Paul’s third point made in his own defense (vv. 15-17), is his description to the Galatians of the sovereign and gracious nature of God’s call of him to be the apostle to the Gentiles. “*But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone nor did I*

¹ S. Kim, “Jesus, Sayings of,” Dictionary of Paul, 490.

² Richard B. Hays put it this way: “In Paul we encounter a first-century Jewish thinker who, while under going a profound disjuncture with his own religious tradition, grappled his way through to a vigorous and theologically generative reappropriation of Israel’s Scriptures. However great the tensions between his heritage and his new Christian convictions, he insistently sought to show that his proclamation of the gospel was grounded in the witness of Israel’s sacred texts.” See Hays, The Echo of Scripture in the Letters of Paul (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 2.

³ Burton, Galatians, ICC, 45.

go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.” Jesus appeared to Paul about three years after our Lord’s crucifixion and resurrection. Paul now sees this event through the eyes of faith; his call to apostleship was a call from his birth, literally from his mother’s womb. The emphasis here falls upon God’s sovereign act in calling Paul to faith and then equipping him to be the pre-eminent missionary to the Gentiles.

Paul’s mention of this harkens us to the Servant Song of Isaiah 49:1-7 (our Old Testament lesson), where the prophet Isaiah foretells that Jesus, the coming servant and Messiah, would be a light to the Gentiles and would bring his salvation to the end of the earth. Paul was chosen by God before his own birth to preach Christ to the nations, since Paul is now a bond-servant of Jesus Christ, the servant-king. It is in this light that Paul speaks of God as revealing his Son “to him”—literally an “apocalypse,” (unveiling). This occurred on the Damascus Road, when scales (symbolic of unbelief) fell from Paul’s eyes.

Finally, in order to defend his authority, Paul recounts his two post-conversion visits to Jerusalem, and subsequent ministry beginning in 1:18-21. *“Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother. (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia.”* Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, Paul tells us that he sought to get acquainted with Peter, and that they spent over two weeks together. We can only imagine what they talked about. Peter must have been a tremendous source of information about the historical events surrounding the life and ministry of our Lord. Paul also met with James, the Lord’s brother.

Paul did not spend all of his time with Peter and James, however. In Acts 9:28-30, we learn that *“he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him.”* Opposition to his ministry in Galatia was nothing new for Paul. But the way in which the Judaizers had undermined an entire Christian congregation was. Paul fights against them with everything in him.

In verses 22-23, Paul tells the Galatians *“I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, ‘He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.’”* Paul also mentions how he had labored in Cilicia and Tarsus for some time. *“And they glorified God because of me. Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me.”* Paul is describing his second visit to Jerusalem. This is likely the famine-relief visit mentioned in Acts 11:27-30, and occurs prior to the Jerusalem council described in Acts 15. Says Paul in verse 2 of chapter 2, *“I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain.”*

In Acts 11:28, we read of the prophecy of Agabus, who through the Holy Spirit, predicted the coming famine in Jerusalem which prompted Paul and Barnabas to take the famine relief money from Antioch down to Jerusalem. In what was probably a private interview, Paul set his teaching (the gospel I teach among the Gentiles) before the leaders of the Jerusalem church, not so much for their approval, but in an acknowledgment of their authority so that there would be no division between Jewish and Gentile Christians. He also did so that the offering taken from among the Gentile churches could be accepted. Paul makes it clear to the Judaizers in Galatia, that his gospel was not only revealed to him by Jesus

Christ, but that it was the same gospel believed and taught in the Jerusalem church.⁴

Next, Paul turns to what is perhaps the most sinister threat facing the Galatians, the deceptive nature of actions of the Judaizers. In verses 3-6 he reminds the Galatians, *“but even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me.”*

It is important to inform the Galatians that Titus, a Gentile traveling with Paul, was not compelled by the Jerusalem church to be circumcised. This means that the Judaizers in Galatia did not have the support of the Jerusalem church, which is a very important point given the fact that these false brothers had deceptively infiltrated the ranks of the believers at Antioch as recorded in Acts 15:1 and were teaching this different gospel (in reality no gospel) that *“unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”* These men were apparently the same ones deceiving the Galatian Christians and who will later show up at the Jerusalem council to protest against Paul’s doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone.

Paul condemns the Judaizers in the harshest of terms. Their behavior is deceitful. *“They slipped in to spy on our liberty”*—specifically in this case, the doctrine that the Gentiles were justified by faith alone, apart from keeping the law of Moses and submitting to circumcision. These false teachers sought to enslave the very Christians for whom Christ died to free, thereby denying the Gospel he was preaching. As Paul will go on to say in chapter 5:1, *“for freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”* Paul also warns the Galatians that if you give into them, Christ will be of no value to you! You will desert Jesus Christ and fall from grace! Very high stakes indeed.

Reminding the Galatians in verse 7 what had happened when Paul reported to the leaders of the Jerusalem church, he states *“on the contrary . . . they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised,”* as Paul finishes the point begun in verse 1. The leaders of the church added nothing to Paul’s message to the Gentiles, such as the condition to be circumcised or keep certain aspects of the ceremonial law. This, in no uncertain terms, means that circumcision is not part of the gospel!

This fact is also evident in the diverse ministry of the church to Jew and Gentile. Says Paul in verses 8-10, *“for he [God] who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.”* There was a very positive outcome from the meeting between Paul and the apostolic leadership of the Jerusalem church.

The apostles recognized that God was as at work in Paul’s efforts to reach the Gentiles every bit as much as he was in Peter’s efforts to reach the Jews. Peter and Paul were preaching the same gospel to different audiences. The leaders of the church also recognized “the grace” bestowed upon Paul, acknowledging

⁴ See the discussion of this in Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 108-111.

God's call of Paul to an apostolic office. They also acknowledged that the mission of Paul and Barnabas was to go back to the Gentiles and continue preaching to them. They even extended to Paul the "right hand of fellowship." But the apostles will continue their efforts to reach the Jews by preaching Christ crucified and justification by grace alone through faith alone. Paul, clearly recognizes that Peter, James (our Lord's brother) and John are the leaders of the church, picking up on the theme of the church as God's temple, with these three being "pillars" of that temple of which John will later describe in an eschatological sense when referring to the church in Philadelphia (cf. Revelation 3:12).⁵

Given the deception of these Judaizers and the attractiveness of their false gospel of Christ plus human effort, a collision between the weak-willed Peter and the iron-willed Paul was inevitable. In verses 11-14, Paul tells us, "*but when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?'*" Even the apostles must have their doctrine and conduct checked in light of Scripture!

This leads to a rather interesting recounting by Paul of how he was forced to confront Peter to his face when he had fallen into the Judaizer's trap. There is an interesting progression here. Paul calls himself Peter's guest (Galatians 1:18-20), then describes Peter as a fellow apostle (2:1-10), before, finally, Paul ends up confronting Peter when he falls into serious doctrinal error (Galatians 2:11-14).⁶ While it is difficult to know how much of this is a word for word account of what Paul said to Peter, and how much is a summation, this amounts to a major confrontation over the doctrine of justification. Paul wins!

The Gentiles and Jews enjoyed table fellowship in Antioch, participating in the Lord's Supper together, with Peter apparently approving of the notion. In Acts 10:9-48, we read of Peter's vision and visit to Cornelius' home, where the Holy Spirit had told him that "all foods were clean." From this Peter had concluded, "*truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him*" (v. 34 ff.). As recounted by Luke, the Gentiles were baptized and received the Holy Spirit, just as occurred to the Jewish believers. Peter saw Jew and Gentile on an equal footing before God, and both groups were harmoniously receiving the sacrament together. That is, *until* "certain men came from James," members of the "circumcision group."

Because of the Judaizer's influence over him, Peter withdrew from table fellowship with Gentiles, and even talked the otherwise reliable Barnabas into doing the same. Paul speaks of Peter's and Barnabas' actions as hypocritical. He even says Peter's decision resulted from "fear." Paul uses the term, "hypocrite," which literally means "play-acting" (*hypokrisis*), pointing to Peter's lack of courage in standing up to false teachers.⁷ Whether Peter was afraid that his actions would compromise missionary efforts to the Jews, or if he was afraid of being ostracized by other Jewish leaders, or even if he was even afraid of bodily harm, isn't quite clear. Because of his weakness, Paul opposes him to his face.

⁵ Bruce, Commentary on Galatians, 122.

⁶ Fung, Galatians, 104-105.

⁷ Fung, Galatians, 109.

This was not merely a personality conflict. Peter's conduct "*was not in step with the truth of the gospel.*" Paul uses a verb (*anthistemi*, v. 11) which indicates that Peter's actions amounted to a reversal of the position he took in Antioch—"the truth of the Gospel." Now Peter's play-acting was a "defection or deviation from that truth."⁸ Paul confronts Peter with his hypocrisy in front of everyone. "*If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?*" Peter's actions are causing division between Jew and Gentile, and worse, undermining the gospel grounded in the doing and dying of Jesus Christ, not in obedience to the law of Moses. Since this issue involved scandal which effected the preaching of the gospel, it could not be handled privately as required in Matthew 18:15-20.

How does Paul's defense of his gospel and his calling as apostle to the Gentiles apply to us today? This episode reminds us that Paul's gospel is not something which he made up, but was revealed to him personally by Jesus and then confirmed by the pillars of the church, Peter, James, and John. Paul reminds the churches that the critical issue is not so much "who" is preaching, but "what" is preached. Even the Apostle Peter must be confronted when he falls into doctrinal error. Fortunately, Paul rescues Peter from very serious consequences—condemnation from the brothers because of his own hypocrisy.⁹ The issue is content of what is preached and the standard used is fidelity to the gospel!

In Galatians, Paul is dealing with the fact that there will indeed be those who distort the gospel and who risk falling under Paul's anathema. But a more difficult scenario, and one we are more likely to face today, is when a minister who professes to believe the correct gospel, won't preach it for fear of scaring off so-called "seekers," or fear of upsetting people. A heresy trial is far easier to conduct than to test for a lack of courage or conviction. To profess the gospel but then not preach it, no doubt, is a victory for the Judaizers, since the false gospel spreads more quickly when the real gospel is missing through silence.

Another scenario raised by Paul is that will be those who preach Christ correctly, but from selfish or improper motives. Lacking omniscience, we cannot judge a preacher or teacher's motives. But we can judge the doctrine and the content of their preaching—the point that Paul is making here. As Paul concludes in Philippians 1:18: "*What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.*" Too often, we have this backwards. In an entertainment culture such as ours, we tend to evaluate whether or not the preacher is a nice guy, sincere and entertaining. If he is, it is then easy to overlook the fact that he may not be preaching Christ crucified, or else preaching another gospel, that of faith in Christ plus the merit of human effort!

Just as false brothers infiltrated the ranks of the Galatian churches to spy on their liberty, so too, we can expect similar spies and agitators to attempt the same thing in our congregations today. Satan is not very original but he is persistent. Spies will come and report back to their Judaizing cronies about our liberty in Christ. Hating our freedom, they will attempt to enslave us again by taking our freedom from us, usually through attempting to subvert the preaching of Christ crucified. It is Jesus Christ who sets us free through his blood and righteousness. It is Satan and his minions who seek to re-enslave us to works-righteousness, or the rules taught by men, preaching a so-called gospel of "do not taste," "do not handle," "do not touch" (cf. Col. 2:20-23) In Galatians 5:1, Paul exhorts the Galatians to remember that Christ has died to set them free, and to stand firm in their opposition to all those who seek to enslave them. It

⁸ Fung, *Galatians*, 109.

⁹ Moo, *Galatians: Baker Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2013), 145.

was our Lord who declared “*if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed*” (John 8:36)!

No doubt, Reformed theology attracts some—who, through immaturity and sin—abuse the liberty and freedom they have in Christ. But God will judge them and convict them of their sin through the preaching of the law. When modern Judaizers worm their way into a congregation that preaches Christ and enjoys Christian liberty, spies immediately find those few who abuse their freedom in Christ, and then, such sinful and immature behavior is made the example of why we should not preach free grace and Christ crucified. They tell everyone who will listen that the proclamation of free grace and Christ crucified inevitably leads to the abuse of Christian liberty. This abuse by some, supposedly, proves that it is freedom in Christ which is the problem. But this effectively takes the focus off the real source of the problem, the sinfulness and immaturity of the abusers. This charge makes perfect sense to those who think that religion is about making people better, and who cannot understand that Christianity is about Jesus Christ setting sinners free from the guilt and power of sin for his own glory.

Those who abuse their freedom should be subject to Godly discipline. The problem lies with them, not with the gospel. The gospel sets us free to live lives of gratitude. It does not create license for us to continue in sin. It is human sinfulness, not the preaching of Christ crucified which deceives us into thinking that we can become Christians and still live like pagans. The abuse of freedom is sin, not a reason to enslave ourselves again! This is the great lie of Satan— “since some abuse their freedom in Christ, get rid of the freedom in Christ!” Before we know it, we are taken in.

When Christian liberty is taken away on the grounds that someone abuses their liberty, the Judaizers win. While we must discipline those who abuse their freedom, at the very same time, we must preach the gospel of Christ crucified and Christian liberty louder and clearer than ever when Judaizers in our midst tip their hand. We must not give into them, Paul says, for the truth of the gospel! For Paul, to give Moses even an inch is to give Moses everything. To give in to the Judaizers *at all*, is to deny the gospel! A so-called gospel of Jesus Christ *plus* human merit is a different gospel which is no gospel at all!

In Galatia, it is the zealous defenders of the law of Moses and the religion of Israel have departed from YHWH, who raised Jesus from the dead, and commissioned Paul to preach Christ to the Gentiles. In Isaiah’s prophecy, God foretold that Jesus Christ would be preached to the nations, as a light to the Gentiles so that salvation may come to the end of the earth. At the mention of this gospel, kings will rise to their feet in respect and princes fall to their knees in shame. This will happen, Isaiah says, because the Holy One of Israel has anointed his Messiah—Jesus. We now learn that the Holy One has chosen Paul to preach that same Messiah to the nations. This was God’s doing, not Paul’s. Who were the Judaizers to try to stop Paul? YHWH’s purposes cannot be thwarted.

It is the truth of the gospel which calls us to faith in Jesus, and it alone sets us free from the guilt and power of sin, while exposing the deception of Satan and his henchmen. When the gospel of Christ is before our eyes, the Lord himself sets us free from all of those things which had enslaved us. Let no one dare attempt to undo what the blood of Christ has purchased for us. By the grace of God and through the power of the Holy Spirit, let us, like Paul, stand firm and resist every attempt of those who seek to enslave us when Christ has died to set us free! We must do this without fear “so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved.”