

No Other Gospel (or: When it's right for Christians to curse)

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[0 : 00] As you're turning to Galatians chapter 1, let me let you into a little secret. I said that David Robery had been working very hard on putting these things onto the website for us.

He said to me last week he'd hoped to have had it done a little while ago, but he'd got very busy with some other things. And I discovered the other things was that he got very busy getting engaged to Julie McGill.

But it's a secret, I'm not allowed to tell anybody. So you'll keep a secret. Congratulations to David and Julie. Well, Galatians 1, 6-10.

If we wanted a title for this, I suppose it could be a little better than the heading in my Bible, probably yours. No other gospel. Or if you wanted something a bit more provocative, perhaps, when it's right for Christians to curse.

As we said last week, the Galatian letter can be a little bit difficult to understand, at least in part.

[1 : 04] Sometimes it is hard to see exactly what it is that Paul is arguing against. But we must get that clear in our minds right at the beginning.

We must think hard about this, otherwise we're going to make mistakes. And we looked last week at the first few verses, which really summarise Paul's gospel. In fact, the two words there in verse 3 really summarise it, grace and peace.

His gospel message is all of the grace of God. And the result of that gospel message is peace. True, complete, lasting peace.

It all comes through Christ, he says, who gave himself for two things. He gave himself for sins. That is, a sacrifice for sins, to deal with the past.

But also, to deliver us, to rescue us, from the present evil age. In other words, the purpose of Christ's death was not simply forgiveness alone.

[2 : 07] That's only half the story, half the gospel. We've been forgiven, but Paul says we've been brought into a new life.

The life of the coming age, the life of the age to come, the new creation. And what Paul is saying is that that too is a matter of grace alone.

This new life in verse 4 that he's speaking about, is a life that is based upon Christ's work for us on the cross, and Christ's consequent work in us, by his Holy Spirit.

His Holy Spirit coming to indwell us, to deliver us, from this present evil age. That's why Bishop Lightfoot, in his commentary, says that this is the keynote of the epistle to the Galatians, rescue from bondage into life.

And that's the crux, you see, of this letter. Paul's opponents were Christians. They were Jewish Christian missionaries, come from Jerusalem.

[3 : 18] And they were not in dispute with Paul, about the need for justification by Christ, through faith, for the forgiveness of sins, for the beginning of the Christian life.

They weren't disputing that. Chapter 2, verse 15 following, it's quite clear, Paul's saying that we agree on this. We who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, we know a person is not justified by works of law, but through faith in Jesus Christ.

They weren't disputing that that's the way you begin the Christian life. It's through faith alone. It's through faith in Jesus Christ and what he's done. Now what they were saying was, our gospel's not at all different from Paul's.

But we're telling you something additional, something more advanced. In other words, what Paul says about becoming a Christian and beginning the Christian faith is quite right.

We happily endorse that, and you've begun well. But of course, you don't want to stay still, you want to go on in your Christian experience. You want to progress, you want to live the new life.

[4 : 31] And to do that really properly, well you need more than what Paul was telling you. You need the law, you need especially, the teachers were saying, you need especially the laws that mark out the Jewish people as different, as distinct, as God's community.

You simply can't have that unless you become circumcised. Unless you start doing as we do, keeping the Jewish festivals, keeping the food laws and so on.

If you want to be a true Israelite, have the true New Testament Christian experience, you've got to add these things to what Paul helped you begin with.

And that all sounds very, very plausible, you see. And one can understand why new, young Christians in a church plant, visited by the impressive teachers, come all the way from Jerusalem, the birthplace, the cradle of the faith.

Well, they'd be very impressed by that. But Paul, immediately in his letter, and all the way through, weighs in, adamantly opposed to that message. Not at all, he says.

[5 : 44] That way is not advancing, not even just retreating, it's going all the way back into the bondage that you've been rescued from. Notice, Paul, all the Christian life, from the beginning, all the way through and right to the very end.

All of that is by grace alone. All of that Christian life is by grace in Christ, not by the law of Moses. All of the Christian life is by the Spirit of Christ who came to you at the new birth and now lives in you and will continue to live in you all the way through your life.

Remember in chapter 3, verse 3, he says, you began with the Spirit, remember? And in chapter 5, verse 25, he says, so you go on in the Spirit, you walk in the Spirit. And in chapter 6, verse 8, he says, at the very end you will reap eternal life from the Spirit.

It's Christ by His Spirit from beginning to end. There's nothing you can add to that. There is nothing to add to that. There couldn't be anything more. There's no longer anything to do with ethnic identity.

That age has gone. The great climax of chapter 3, there is no longer Jew and Gentile or slave and free for that matter or male and female.

[7 : 15] We're all one in Christ Jesus because that day has come. The new age has dawned. The present evil age has passed. So you see, the dispute in Galatians is not so much over the beginning of the Christian life.

What we normally are talking about when we talk about justification, although it does encompass that and it does include that because ultimately anything that adds anything to the Gospel really is just adding something to the free grace of God.

It does encompass that of course, but the emphasis here is about going on living in the faith and growing in the faith and going on to completion. Going on to that perfection which will only come at last, Paul says, when we're in heaven.

That's why his emphasis in chapter 3, verse 3 is on the Spirit. You've begun with the Spirit. Are you now trying to be perfected by the flesh? You see?

No, no, no. He says you don't begin one way and go on a different way. You go on the way you began. There's only one Gospel. The Gospel of Christ that brings you into his kingdom.

[8 : 24] The Gospel of Christ that keeps you in his kingdom. The Gospel of Christ that will deliver you finally and at the last day into eternal life. Only one Gospel.

And he defends it so vigorously and absolutely. He's saying all the Christian life beginning to end is through the Holy Spirit. Not by works of law.

Not by anything to do with the flesh. Not by anything to do with that old evil age. Only thing that counts says Paul is faith expressing itself through love.

Chapter 5, verse 6. The only thing that counts chapter 6, verse 15 is new creation. Not any ethical ethnic things. Not any social things.

Not any other factors that you can dream up of any kind that might divide you. No. What matters is not that you're a Jew or a Gentile or a man or a woman or anything else.

[9 : 25] But what matters is faith. What matters is Christ. What matters is life in the Holy Spirit. And that for Paul is the very heart of the Gospel.

And that's been something that's been destroyed forever. This distinction of Jew and Gentile. That dividing wall of hostility as he calls it in Ephesians. The wall that kept Jew and Gentile apart.

No. There's no distinction any longer he says. You're all one in Christ. You're indwelled by the Spirit. And the thing that marks you out is not things on the outside but it's the life lived out from within.

The fruit of the Spirit. These are the things that should be visible in your lives. The life of the new age being put on display in the midst of this present evil age that you're being saved from. Your behaviour the behaviour of the age of the flesh must be a thing of the past. Paul says it's been crucified. And the Spirit age has begun in your life.

[10:32] And so you're to walk in the Spirit. What he's saying is that the period of national separation of God separating out a covenant people of his own by national boundaries.

People of Israel a distinct political identity. Those days have gone. Those days were only ever temporary. That's what he's going to argue in chapter 3 and 4. Those days when this people were marked out by the laws of Moses that was a temporary period and that has now finished. Now over. Now we're into the new age when all the seed of Abraham will be blessed through Christ. When all the nations will receive the blessing promised to Abraham.

That age has come he said. Came with Christ. It's the age of the Spirit. And what has become real in God's history God's plan of salvation for the world and the coming of Christ has also become real in your experience by the coming of the Spirit into your hearts.

Remember we looked at chapter 4 about the fullness of the time verse 4. When the fullness of the time has come God sent his Son into the world. And because that's happened he's now sent the Spirit of his Son into your heart.

[11:52] So what's happened to you in your experience believing and becoming Christians repeats what has happened in the world. Christ has come in the fullness of time.

So a new age has dawned in history but a new age has dawned for you Galatian believers in your lives in your hearts you've changed. The age of the Spirit is now here. And that means that to start to behave as though that hadn't happened to start to divide once again to not eat together as Jews and Gentiles to do what Peter was doing refusing to share a table with Gentile Christians because they didn't do the things that Moses commanded to do that was so desperate it was to deny that Christ had come at all.

It was as if they were denying that anything had changed in their own experience. That's why it's so serious for Paul to behave as the Galatians were beginning to do was to turn back the clock as if Christ had never come either in history or in their lives.

That's why he can say in chapter 2 verse 22 if you behave like that then Christ died for nothing. For nothing. Do you see what a terrible thing that is to say? And that's what explains the severity of the tone of this letter you see it's as crucial as that.

To behave the way you're behaving is to destroy the gospel of Christ. As stark as that.

[13:35] And that explains why in verse 6 Paul begins his letter proper with such a word of stinging rebuke. Very striking isn't it? First thing he says there in verse 6 is this that desertion from the gospel is desertion from God himself.

There's no greeting there's no encouragement just an immediate rebuke. I'm shocked at you he says. I'm shocked because you're deserting God. Like chapter 3 verse 1 he says you're fools you've been bewitched.

He's not holding back. He's not saying now let's sit down and have a coffee and talk out this minor theological disagreement that we've got here. I'm sure we can work it all out in the end.

He's not saying I'm deeply interested in these new insights that you find from another tradition let's see how we can incorporate them in our joint worship together.

He's not saying that. It's a stinging rebuke. He's saying what you're doing is scorning God himself. What you're doing is rejecting God himself.

[14:48] him who called you. You see theology and experience are inextricable. What you believe affects your relationship with God.

That's why it's so important. That's why Paul says to desert the gospel what you believe about God is actually to desert God himself in person to rupture the relationship that you have with God himself.

Because believing in the Bible is not just a matter of the head. It's not just an intellectual thing. That's not where you believe in the Bible. You believe in your heart, the depth of your being, the control centre of your personality.

That's where you believe. And something that affects your belief therefore affects the heart of your relationships. Think about a marriage vow.

What is it that we say in the wedding forsaking all other to keep thee only unto me so long as we both shall live. See, if you break that marriage vow by committing adultery, you're rejecting that promise, aren't you?

[16 : 08] But in rejecting that promise, you're not just doing something intellectual. You're not just breaking a promise, you're breaking a relationship. you're rejecting your spouse.

And adultery is not another marriage, it's no marriage at all. And that's what Paul's saying. Another gospel isn't another gospel, it's no gospel at all.

Verse 7, you want to distort the gospel first, you're turning verse 6 to a different gospel, not that there is another one. There is no other gospel. What you're doing, you see, is you're focusing on yourselves and not God.

You're turning your eyes away from Him who called you, onto things that you're taken up with doing, whether it's ceremonies or observances or racial identity, whatever it is, you're robbing the experience of God in Christ.

In Christ, you're united to Him, in a bond, in a marriage, that's what's happened when the Holy Spirit brought you to birth. But by doing what you're doing, you're pushing God away.

[17 : 23] The tragic irony, of course, is that the Galameque religion■■■ is the hat.