

There Is But One Gospel - Of Grace and Peace

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Date: 23 November 2025

Preacher: Joel Tay

[0:00] We're going to turn now to our reading this morning and we're in the letter of Galatians! So do turn your Bible to Galatians. If you don't have a Bible with you, we have plenty of Bibles! available at the side or at the back. So do please grab a Bible if you need one.

And one of our ministers in training, Joel Tay, is going to be preaching to us this morning from these opening words in the letter of Galatians, page 972, if you have one of the church visitor Bibles.

Galatians chapter 1, I'm reading the first 10 verses. So Galatians 1, verse 1. Paul, an apostle, not from men, nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead, and all the brothers who are with me, to the churches of Galatia.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel. Not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

[1:40] But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

For I am now seeking the approval of man or of God. Or am I trying to please man? If I was still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

All amen. May God bless to us his word this morning. Well, a very good morning, folks, and to those joining us from Bath Street and Queen's Park.

If you get your Bibles open to Galatians 1, that would be most helpful. I think you should be able to find a reading on page 972.

Now I wonder if you'll agree with me that for most of the Christian life, it's not particularly exciting.

[2:56] It's slow, ordinary, and even at times painfully discouraging. Yes, there may be moments of encouragement, excitement here and there, particularly if you're a relatively young Christian and you've still got your rose-tinted lenses on, you're filled with zeal and eagerness.

But very soon, quickly after, well, day to day just feels like we're spiritually plodding along. We read our Bibles, but our minds wander and drift away.

We pray, but our thoughts are distracted. Our words feel thin. We fight the same old sinful desires that we thought we defeated years ago.

And often enough, even though we rarely admit it aloud, we wonder, is anything actually happening? Am I even growing?

And it's precisely then, in the ordinary day-to-day grind, where life is slow, progress minimal, that actually we start to become vulnerable and easily tempted.

[4:04] We begin to crave shortcuts, supplements, boosters, anything that promises to lift us out of the ordinary and to give us a deeper experience, a next-level spirituality, something that helps us to feel more mature, more serious, more advanced.

And when someone comes along and offers it, however subtly, however sincerely, well, it becomes incredibly enticing. Now, that is exactly what we see happening back in Galatia back then.

A group of missionaries, or as Paul calls them, troublemakers, likely Jewish Christians from Jerusalem, had since arrived in Galatia with confidence, with charm. They came not to replace Jesus, but they came to improve Jesus, to offer a Christ-plus gospel.

Yes, Jesus is good, they said, but if you want to be a proper Christian, more complete, more authentic, well, then you need the law. You need a little more ritual, a little more effort.

And the Galatians, caught in the same slow grind that we all know too well, well, they were buying into it. We see that from Paul's response in verse 6.

[5:24] I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him, who called you in the grace of Christ, and are turning to a different gospel. Not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

That is why Paul picks up his pen with such alarm, such intensity and urgency. Because this isn't just a minor adjustment, or an alternative upgrade, but to distort the gospel is to lose the gospel.

And to lose the gospel is to lose everything. And so with sticks that high, we see Paul wastes no time. He begins not with pleasantries, not with thanksgiving, not his usual warm pastoral encouragement, but with the foundations.

He takes them straight back to the gospel. Because if the gospel is what they're in danger of losing, then the gospel is precisely what they must grasp again.

So, first, look with me again at verses 1 to 5, where we see Paul reminds us of the one true gospel, the gospel of grace and peace.

[6:40] The gospel which is nothing less than God himself reaching down in sheer grace to rescue and to deliver us from this present evil age, offering to us all the promise and certainty of peace.

But before Paul expounds the gospel, just briefly notice how Paul begins by underlying his authority. Verse 1, Paul, an apostle, not from men nor through men, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father.

Now that's quite striking, isn't it? Not because he calls himself an apostle, he does that elsewhere in his other letters, but because here in Galatians, he emphasizes the source of his apostleship.

Paul's commission to preach the gospel did not come from any human counsel, not from the Jerusalem apostles, any earthly institution, but it came from God himself.

But why? Why make this emphasis at the start? Well, one likely reason is because Paul's authority was being questioned, perhaps even being undermined.

[7:54] As he writes later in Galatians 4.16, well, the Galatians have started to perceive Paul as the enemy. It wouldn't be entirely surprising, would it, if these troublemakers from Jerusalem were perhaps saying, well, yes, we know that you've heard from Paul the gospel, and we know that he has taught you that.

But you see, Paul isn't just one of the twelve, is he? He's not from the inner circle of Jerusalem. And so actually, his gospel is inferior to ours.

His gospel is incomplete. What you've heard, what you've learned, what you've received, well, that is the gospel light. And yes, it's a good place to start, don't get me wrong, but now we've come to give you the gospel plus, the fuller, richer, deeper message that will help you to grow, to mature, to become a real, proper Christian.

You can almost hear the appeal, can't you? A kind of spiritual upgrade. But no, Paul is having none of that. He declares his gospel is not man-made, his authority is not man-given, but originates entirely from God himself.

Paul's message is God's message. And so to abandon, to reject Paul's gospel, well, that is to abandon and to reject God's gospel.

[9:25] And with that established, well, Paul immediately draws their eyes and our eyes away from himself and back to the heart of the matter, the cross of Christ. He invites us to marvel afresh at the sheer goodness and glory of the gospel.

Look at verse 3. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever.

I mean, in just a few words, Paul captures the very heart, the very essence of the Christian gospel, doesn't he? Elsewhere, in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul describes humanity to be dead in trespasses and sins, following the course of the world, sons of disobedience, children of wrath.

And similarly, in his letter to the Romans, he describes humans by nature to be enemies of God, alienated, hostile to God. And yet here, in his opening words to the Galatians, to such a people, to people like us, well, what does God's words say?

Grace to you and peace. Words of reassurance and comfort. But where does this grace and peace come from?

[10:56] Well, none other than from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins. That's the central note of the gospel, isn't it? Why it indeed is truly good news.

Because of the cross, the atonement accomplished by Christ at the cross. You see, the gospel isn't about instruction, advice, spiritual coaching.

The gospel isn't just a list or a manual of steps for you and I to observe in order to earn God's favor. No. But it is good news of God the Father who wills our salvation.

Of Christ who has given himself freely, willingly, sacrificially for our sins. That is grace. An undeserved and an unrepayable gift from God.

And notice, what does Christ's self-giving achieve? Well, it's not just the atonement and forgiveness of sins, is it? No, look at verse 4. Christ gave himself for our sins to deliver us from this present evil age.

[12:13] It is a divine intervention that snatches us out of this dark age of sin, death, and rebellion and brings us into the age of new creation, dawn of the atoning death, resurrection, ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is a deliverance, a rescue, and it is definitive, finished, accomplished. and therefore now we have peace.

Peace with God. Peace secured not by our own obedience, but by Christ's perfect obedience. And that's vital for us to be clear about, isn't it?

Because how conscious we are of the power of sin in our lives, where doubts creep in, our conscience tugging away with guilt, remorse for the past, perhaps the many foolish mistakes we've made, the reckless, catastrophic mess that we've stumbled into again and again, stirring up anxiety, fear within us.

But friends, Paul wants us all to hear again, to know that the gospel of Christ offers not a partial, but a finished salvation.

[13:37] You and I, we can be assured that his cross is sufficient. His grace is enough. His deliverance is definite.

And so truly, to God, be the glory forever and ever. God, we see God, but having held up the glory of the gospel like a diamond in the light, we see Paul then turns and shows them the chips, the fractures that threaten it.

He moves rather abruptly from doxology to disbelief, from praise to perplexity. So look on with me to verses 6 and 9, where we find Paul's affectionate but firm rebuke.

And his point here is simple, that to desert and to distort the gospel is not only dangerous, but deadly.

I'll say again, deserting and distorting the gospel is not only dangerous, but deadly. You see, Paul isn't just indulging in the rhetoric here, but he speaks with apostolic clarity, precisely because the danger at hand is not an abstract one, but a real and urgent one.

[15:07] A distorted gospel doesn't just weaken the church, but it destroys it. Verse 6, I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.

Not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.

As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. Now those are some weighty words, aren't they?

Sobering, startling, and yet completely necessary. Three times here in these verses we see Paul mention the gospel. Verse 7, the gospel of Christ.

Verse 8, a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you. And verse 9, a gospel contrary to the one you received. That repetition is not accidental.

[16:27] No, Paul is circling deliberately and urgently. He wants them to understand that the very gospel itself is under threat here. And it's not simply a matter of preference or perspective.

But to distort the gospel is to lose the gospel. And to lose the gospel is to lose everything. Just imagine again, what the troublemakers in Galatia might have been saying.

Of course, of course, we agree. We agree with Paul regarding the necessity of Christ in justification. We agree that human needs forgiveness for sins and faith is the instrument for receiving it.

But the issue isn't about how you begin the Christian life, but how you continue, how you carry on to maturity. Paul's gospel, as we explained, that is the gospel light.

We of Jerusalem, however, we have the gospel plus, the full lure gospel. We've got something more advanced, in addition to Paul's gospel, that you need if you want to progress in your life.

[17:37] Now, for them back then, as we learn in Acts 15, verse 5, that something was the law of circumcision. The Galatians were Gentiles, they were not a part of the Jewish heritage, church, and so in spite of having heard and received the gospel from Paul, perhaps they felt lacking, lacking in credibility, in authenticity.

And so when the offer of circumcision came, something extra, something concrete, visible, and especially from these older, longer established brothers of the church, well, that would be quite persuasive, wouldn't it?

Now, I'm sure none of my brothers here today would be tempted to reinstate the law of circumcision. No one here in their right mind is thinking, you know what, that's exactly what my Christian life is missing and needs.

Thank God for that, no. But we know, don't we? The human heart hasn't changed. We today, in our lives, when troubled by our own failures, our anxieties, the tiny voice sowing doubt in our heads, are we really progressing?

Are we really growing? Are we really maturing? Well, we too secretly long for something tangible, something extra, a boost, to reassure our uncertain hearts, don't we?

[19:04] And promises of such a thing would be very enticing, which is why Paul's rebuke, Paul's warning here, is ever so relevant. But notice as well, these troublemakers, they weren't openly denying Christ, they weren't outrightly rejecting the cross, dismissing the necessity of faith, but they were simply adding something, something trivial, tangible, tangential to the gospel.

gospel. But in doing so, what they were doing is declaring that Jesus hasn't actually or fully delivered us from this present evil age.

They were declaring that Christ's atonement on the cross, well, it actually isn't sufficient, that it is lacking. But of course, Paul sees through the facade right away.

A grace plus something gospel is no gospel. A Christ plus something gospel is no gospel. But more than that, I don't think the reason why Paul's tone and language here is so strong is just because of that.

Look again at verse 6. What is Paul's expression? I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you.

[20:25] Paul doesn't just say, I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting it, the gospel, does he? No, but rather that you are so quickly deserting him, the God who has called you in the grace of Christ.

You see, to desert the gospel of grace, it's not just a doctrinal, theological drift, but it's a spiritual, a relational betrayal.

It is to desert the God of grace, grace, the one who has personally stepped down into this world to deliver us. Make no mistake, that was precisely what the Galatians were doing.

Not a blatant, outright denial, but a soft, subtle drift. The growing inconsistency between what they confessed and how they lived.

The beginnings of hypocrisy. And Paul would not let that drift go unchallenged. I wonder if that's the same challenge that you and I need to hear today.

[21:33] Yes, we do not demand circumcision. We do not observe the Jewish festivals and traditions. We do not keep the food laws as such. But oh, how easily we slip into our own modern, contemporary versions of Gospel Plus, don't we?

Perhaps it's a Gospel Plus our ministry involvement, where we root our identity. Our service becomes the basis, the foundation of it. We know that serving is a joy, a privilege, but we start to get more caught up on serving for the approval of others, other members on the team, our leaders.

And so when we perform well, well, we become proud. Everybody, look at me, look at all I'm doing. Isn't it a jolly good job? Don't you know the rest of the team, they don't work as hard as I do?

I'm indispensable. But especially when we make mistakes, when we fail, then suddenly a crushing weight of despair falls on us. It's almost like we lose all our sense of worth.

I'm not useful, I'm not good. God must love me a little less because of that. Or perhaps it's a gospel plus subscribing to the right theological tribe.

[22:54] You mean you've not read Calvin Institutes? You've not read Turretin's Atlantic Theology? Wait a minute, you don't know the difference between Jonathan Edwards' treatment on created and uncreated grace?

Oh boy, I'm afraid you've got a long way still to go to become a proper Christian. You can't possibly call yourself a serious Christian until you've read all that, can you? Well, we need to be extremely honest with ourselves, don't we?

Because our human heart, it is endlessly creative at inventing new additions to the gospel, at constructing our own badges of belonging.

But that only drives us to turn away from the gospel, away from Christ, and away from the church, the family of God. that is to have less than what Christ has already worn for us, definitively.

When you and I, when we make secondary things, good things as they are in themselves, to become necessary and key things for acceptance before God, well then they have stopped helping us, but have instead enslaved us.

[24 : 08] That is what Paul was pleading with the Galatians and with us today, adrift that we must be honest enough to recognize in ourselves. And we see the severity of such distortions, don't we?

In verse 8 and 9, what does Paul say? Even if we or an angel should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one, let him be accursed.

As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

Twice Paul echoes this statement of judgment, and it's harsh. Perhaps some of you might shudder, feel quite uncomfortable hearing that, but just to be clear, no, Paul's anger, Paul's rage against these troublemakers distorting the gospel isn't unique, but rather an echo of what the Lord Jesus himself had said earlier.

Look up Matthew 18 in your own time, but Jesus strongly warns that whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, well, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck, and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

[25 : 28] To distort the gospel is to turn men and women away from the grace of God, to turn away them from God and towards sin. distorting the gospel is not to bring deliverance from this evil age, but back to it.

And now that is worthy of death. So friends, take a moment, pause and feel the gravity of it. A distorted gospel is not only dangerous, but deadly.

What's at stake here is not simply a matter of opinion of salvation, but if we get the gospel wrong, then it doesn't matter what else we might get right.

If the gospel is distorted, then we stand under the judgment of God. If the gospel is distorted, we lose forgiveness and assurance of eternal life in Christ.

Christ. But on the other hand, if the gospel is held firm, then however small, however unimpressive according to the world that may be, however ordinary a church appears, or know this, that church is standing on the solid rock of grace, receiving all that Christ has won.

[26 : 55] It will not fall for her. It will not fade. But having warned against the troublemakers and the deadly consequences of distortion and desertion, well finally and briefly in verse 10, we see Paul reaffirms what drives and motivates a true servant of Christ.

Namely, that he is one who strives after the approval of God and not of men. Look at me at verse 10. For am I now seeking the approval of men or of God?

Am I trying to please men? If I was still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ. This is the window into the heart of a true gospel minister, isn't it?

But also the heart of every true believer. For Paul was speaking plainly here, that gospel faithfulness and people pleasing, they simply cannot coexist.

You cannot live for the approval of men while also serving the crucified Lord Jesus. Now, that does not mean you carelessly usurp and undermine your boss's authority first thing on Monday morning.

- [28:14] This is not a whole path to do as you please. No, there was a complete misunderstanding of what Paul was stating here. But rather, as Paul writes and expresses later in Galatians 3, now that faith has come, there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male and female, but all one in Christ.

He abolishes all sorts of social, ethical distinctions and lays the reality of the gospel. But in this new age, dawn at the death of Christ, Christ, there are only two groups of people.

First, those who are in Christ, who are free, true offsprings of Abraham, heirs according to the promise, born according to the spirit.

And secondly, those who are not in Christ, still under the yoke of slavery, held under the captivity of the law, born according to the flesh. But why this distinction?

What's so crucial about it? Well, because preaching and proclaiming the gospel is offensive. Make no mistake, the cross is deeply offensive to those who would refuse to humble, to submit to the Lord Jesus.

- [29:36] And to those who do preach and proclaim the gospel, the cross of Christ, well, they are and they will be persecuted. We see that plainly in Galatians 4.29, 5.11, and 6.12.

That is the reality, the cost. Just think of all the harassment that takes place when the gospel was proclaimed at street outreach.

Think about the CBR UK teams. They are no strangers to receiving insults, abuse heard at them for speaking up and sharing about the reality of abortion and sharing the gospel of Christ now, are they?

Think about Cliff Johnston, a retired pastor in Northern Ireland who is currently being prosecuted under abortion buffer zone laws for an open-air sermon on John 3.16.

He was preaching, yes, but he didn't mention the word abortion, and yet he is being prosecuted. But not just here in the UK. Think of all the faithful churches around the world, in Sudan, Libya, India, Pakistan, North Korea.

- [30:48] As we were hearing from Johnny at our prayer meeting on Wednesday, the work that Open Door Ministry is engaged in, to be made aware of the fact that there are more than 380 million Christians who are facing high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith.

brothers and sisters, you and I, we need to be realistic. There can be no naivety, because the world that we live in is as such.

This at present is still an evil age, under the dominion of Satan. And so even though those who truly belong to Jesus, who are in Christ, or yes, in one sense, they truly have been delivered from this present evil age, but we are still in the world, aren't we?

We're no longer of the world, but we're still in it. And so we will, and rightfully so, stick out like a sore thumb because of our identity in Christ, because of our faith.

But then that poses a deeply searching question for us all, because the bottom line is people pleasing, well, it essentially reflects an underlying fear of men instead of God.

- [32:12] It's subtle, and yet such a strong temptation within our own human hearts. We might know in our heads that remaining faithful to the gospel will make us unpopular, that it will isolate us at work, at university, perhaps among our friend groups.

We know that standing for Jesus paints a very visible target on our backs, an open invitation for mockery, suspicion, scorn. But when the moment comes, it feels very different, doesn't it?

Perhaps you're the only Christian in your office, and a conversation about sexuality comes up, and suddenly all eyes are on you. What happens? Instead of speaking the truth with gentleness and conviction, you soften it.

You blur the edges. You laugh along. You hide the truth of the gospel behind a nervous smile. Why?

Because in that moment, the approval of your colleagues feels far more concrete, more urgent, more present here and now, than the approval of Christ.

[33:28] So you shrink back. You say less than you should, or perhaps nothing at all. Pressure has a real and remarkable way of revealing the true allegiance of our hearts, doesn't it?

And Paul is quite clear here. If I were still trying to please men, then I would not be a servant of Christ. not just less of a servant, not a weaker, struggling servant, no, but not a servant at all.

So I wonder, whose well-done, good and faithful servant are we living for? Whose acceptance is our identity rooted, anchored in?

Not just in terms of what we profess, but also in terms of how we live. And if we're honest with ourselves, we know, don't we?

There are times that we have cowards, compromised, turned away, shifting our confidence to a gospel-class mentality. Does that mean that we're not genuine Christians?

[34:47] Well, of course not. Paul was not here to condemn the Gentile believers, to condemn us, no, but he is writing precisely so to win us back, to call us back to the gospel of Christ.

He wants us to know that the gospel truly is sufficient. And so even though the Christian life in this present age, this passing world, looks and feels slow, ordinary, mundane, and in fact in many ways it's more difficult, more costly than before we came to Christ.

As we're now aware of our sin, we feel the daily battles against the passions of flesh. Even though the gospel, the cross, is still an offense, a stumbling block to many, and faithfulness, fidelity to Christ and his gospel, only seems to attract hostility and persecution.

Yet brothers and sisters, what Paul does and calls us to do is first to look and to ponder afresh at the one true glorious gospel of Christ, a gospel of peace and grace.

To be clear, by the gospel, that by God's grace, we truly have been liberated, set free from the slavery of sin, delivered from this present evil age.

[36:16] Christ's atoning work at the cross is sufficient. His grace not only brings us in, but also is abundant to sustain and carry us on.

And so let us stand firm. Let us hold fast to the truth of the gospel. And with our empty hands of faith, let us cling unto him, not deserting the God who has called us as we continue to live our days in this passing world beneath the cross.

Let us seek not the approval of men, but let us persevere, press on for the approval that truly matters, that truly counts, that of our crucified and risen Lord Jesus, to whom be the glory forever and ever.

Amen. Amen. Well, let us pray. Father God, how we praise you for your gospel of grace and peace.

How we rejoice knowing that your son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins, has delivered us from this present evil age. How we thank you that your gospel truly is sufficient not only to save us, but also to sustain us.

[37:49] So help us, Lord, to be reminded of this. Help us to remind one another of this, especially when we are discouraged, wearied, that we might not wander from the path before the crown where promised hope and joy is truly to be found.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.