**Galatians 1:3-9 (1-10)** June 23, 2019

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*Galatians 1:3Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

*6I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—7which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! 9As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**“No Other Gospel!”**

**Tough Words for a Tough Time**

***“Let him be eternally condemned.”*** Did those words shock you? It’s the sort of thing you hear in a bar, when people have had more than one too many. It’s the sort of thing you might hear in the workplace when two people who are like oil and water have had to put up with each other, eight or more hours a day, five or more days a week, for years on end and they’ve finally had enough. But in church? In the Bible?!! Who is saying this anyway?

The guy who is saying this is the same one who told others, *“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”* (Romans 12:21). It is the Apostle Paul who said, *“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up”*? (Ephesians 4:29) Where is that “wholesome talk” now? I guess it works well enough when you preach it, but not so well when you actually have to live it, right?

There Paul is in verse 8 saying, ***“Let him be eternally condemned!”*** And then just to prove he meant it, he says it a second time. That’s not the sort of stuff you expect from the Bible. And you probably wouldn’t expect it from your pastor either.

The Apostle Paul comes in for a lot of criticism among people who take the Bible *sort of* seriously. They say things like, “Paul had this thing against women.” “Paul was so… dogmatic—so right and wrong, black and white.” People who like a little wiggle room and moral relativism don’t like the way the Holy Spirit spoke through the Apostle Paul. Least of all do they appreciate what he says here, ***“If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!”*** He’s so non-inclusive, so negative! What’s going on?

Paul’s heart is bleeding.

What does the mother think when her grown child’s life is being lost, one day at a time, through addiction? She sees it all the time. Entire months thrown away. Jobs lost. Piles of money gone. And she thinks back to how it once was: all the smiles of the day of his birth; his kindergarten art on the refrigerator; the award for most improved reader in fifth grade; looking forward to a career with senior year optimism —and it is gone. All that’s left is despair over a dream gone bad. Every morning she hopes for something new, but every evening ends with a sigh and a prayer of desperation. She curses the day a friend gave him his first illegal joint. Her sadness, her anger is not about her. It’s not about being right. It’s about a life lost, a life she loved more than her own.

The Apostle Paul is a father watching the slow motion self-destruction of his children, and these children are especially dear.

The Apostle Paul had had several journeys as a missionary, but he had a first missionary journey. What does that mean? Do you remember the first real road trip of your life? The first time you saw the Gulf of Mexico, the Rocky Mountains, or maybe just the world’s biggest ball of twine. That first road trip will always be the most vivid in your mind.

That is at least some of what it was for Paul. The heart of his very first missionary journey was to these people living in Galatia. Paul’s visit to the Galatian cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe is recorded in the book of Acts, chapters 13 and 14. He brought the good news of a Savior to these people who had never heard of Jesus. He brought them the Gospel even at the expense of his own blood. We are told that at one of the Galatian cities, Lystra, *“Some came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples had gathered around him [I would guess, expecting to bury him] he got up and went back into the city.”* He went back into the city!

These were Paul’s beloved. He remembered how they heard and listened and rejoiced in their Savior. He remembered how the strove *together* for the Gospel. And now they are throwing their life away. He is worried for them.

Like the parent asking God’s judgment on the drug dealer who has ruined so many lives and laughed all the way to the bank; so Paul asks God’s judgment on those who are taking his beloved spiritual children and stealing their eternal future, possibly condemning them to hell.

Do you understand? Do you understand why Paul starts this letter the way he does? This book of the Bible is an intervention, an intervention where the most beloved person in the world steps into the room with an addict and speaks hard, hard words, because those hard, hard words are the only hope, the only hope.

The summary of Paul’s intervention is this:

**“No Other Gospel!”**

**Capital “G” Gospel vs. lower case “g” gospel**

There simply is no other Gospel than the Gospel Paul outlined in briefest form in verses 3-5: ***“Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever.”*** It is about our sin and God’s forgiveness. But that was endangered.

What had happened in these churches was that somehow—and here we don’t have the details—but some people had come into these congregations and insisted that it couldn’t be as easy as “God forgives you!” or “Jesus has died for your sins.”

Here in the Galatian congregations, at this time, the churches were made up largely of Jews who had converted to Christianity. This made sense because the Jews had had the Old Testament. They were anticipating a Messiah, a Savior, and Jesus was that Savior. When they heard the Gospel of Jesus, their Savior from sin, a significant number believed. But after a while, they began to think about how they had grown up in the Law of Moses. How their boys were circumcised on the eighth day, how they rested on the Sabbath, how they honored God by not eating pork and other foods. They looked on the new people coming into the church, who had not grown up with these Jewish sensibilities. These new people weren’t doing any of these treasured traditions in worshiping God. They started to look down at them as the unwashed masses. The new outsider Christians seemed, so irreverent, so unserious about their faith. So instead of rejoicing in people of other backgrounds entering the kingdom of heaven, they insisted that these newbies get serious about their religion on Jewish terms. That was the situation in Galatia. It isn’t our situation today.

But I do hear other “gospels.” You hear them too.

You hear the preachers and see the books. They ask if you have turned over your life to Jesus, “I mean, really handed your life over to Jesus. You can’t just believe, you have be sure you believe.” You hear of churches who make “social justice” the core of their ministry in the current flavor-of-the-day cause. Others focus our relationship with God based on our obedience to God rather than God’s gracious favor toward us. Others belong to the Norman Vincent Peele school of positive thinking, as if God’s highest desire for us were that we have a nice day. Other preach about Christians but very little about Christ; they view the church as a self-help group – how to get the most out of life: good job, good kids, good relationships. But the most deceptive false gospel chipping away even among us Christians, is that it all doesn’t matter, as long as you are earnest in your pursuit of truth—whatever that may be for you.

None of those are the Gospel. None of them deal with the crucial issue of our sin.

What is the real Gospel, the real good news? Paul laid it out in the first sentence of his letter: ***“The Lord Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age.”*** The core of the Gospel is our sin and God’s forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Every book of the Bible makes that clear. That is the Gospel.

Now, at the risk of confusing the issue, I must add that that isn’t the sum total of the Christian message. We do address issues of justice, of poverty, of personal health both physical and mental. But none of these is the Gospel. The foundation, the bedrock is the message about our sin and God’s undeserved favor.

You can feed a hundred people, provide drinking water for 10,000, immunize a million and yet not save a single soul, not even your own. You can have positive thoughts, express hopeful sentiments, share inspirational memes and bring no one a step closer to their Savior. (By the way, anything that labels itself “inspirational”, whether webpage or book is probably too ashamed of the Gospel to speak hard-core Gospel.)

If a book, a preacher, a blog doesn’t make it clear that the Gospel is about my personal Savior from my own sin – sin that I still daily commit even though I fight it daily – then it is another gospel. Not a capital “G” Gospel. It is a lower-case “g” gospel.

Those are just what Paul was describing to the Galatians: ***“I am astonished that you are so quickly… turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.”*** His concern, his sharp language all revolved around this deep distress that these beloved people whom he had known and introduced to their Savior, were walking away from their Savior.

He’s not the only one who spoke like that. Jesus spoke words even more picturesque, for the exact same reason. In Matthew chapter 18 he said, *“Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”*

**Are We as Concerned as Paul?**

Have you, have I, been that concerned about Christians we have known who are wandering from the truth? Are we as concerned as Paul who wrote those shocking words to the Galatians? Or do we sort of shrug it off saying, “Well, it’s their choice. You can lead a horse to water…”

Oh, do we not have to confess our own lack of concern, I mean real genuine concern for those who are shipwrecking their faith? Maybe the shocking thing should not be that Paul said those words, ***“Let him be eternally condemned,”*** but that we don’t! Maybe, the people we should find fault with is not Paul and his harsh words, but with ourselves and our lack of strong language for those who mislead God’s people.

Dear God, forgive me. Forgive us. We have gotten lazy.

And now this is what is so surprising that we almost can’t believe it: he does. He does forgive us! He does forgive our laziness, our indifference toward the eternal fate of others. He forgives, not with a cheap wave of a hand, but through offering up his hands to the crucifiers, the nails, the cross. Forgiven!

That’s the Gospel. There is no other! Amen.