

Warning Signs of a “Different Gospel”

- Trying to please people
- Following human traditions
- Walking the comfortable path.

Galatians 1:1 Paul, an apostle (not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead), 2 and all the brethren who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: 3 Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

On May 17, 1987 an Iraqi F-1 Mirage fighter launched two missiles at the Navy frigate *USS Stark*, which was on patrol in the Persian Gulf. The *Stark* was equipped with two early detection devices for just such an attack. The first was an audible alarm that sounded and the second was a visual alert that would appear on the radar screen. On top of this all, these systems were continually monitored by an electronic warfare operator. In the event of such an attack it was his responsibility to warn the rest of the crew and enact the appropriate defensive measures. Despite this sure-sounding process, the two missiles tore into the side of the *Stark*, ripping a ten-foot hole in her hull and instantly killing 37 American soldiers.

How could such a tragedy strike without warning? What happened to the early detection process? Those were the questions that a House Armed Services Committee was tasked with answering. Their conclusion revealed the problem. The operator in charge of those defense systems had turned off the audible alarm because there were too many false alarms. Because of this, he was not alerted in time and he missed the attack on the radar screen. Such a simple thing in theory, yet profound in its consequences. Although warning signs are usually irritating interruptions, we turn them off at our own peril. The same lesson could be said about removing the battery from the chirping smoke detector, ignoring our computer’s security software updates, or refusing to fasten the safety belt because it’s just such a chore. Simple things, devastating consequences.

God has a warning system in His Word for us too, and although it often seems mundane and annoying from day to day, it protects the most treasured and important Gospel truth, the very power of God to salvation. We read the rest of our text from Galatians chapter 1, picking up at verse 6:

6 I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, 7 which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. 9 As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed. 10 For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ. 11 But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. 12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ. 13 For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. 14 And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. 15 But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, 16 to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who

were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. 18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. 19 But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. 20 (Now concerning the things which I write to you, indeed, before God, I do not lie.) 21 Afterward I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. 22 And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which were in Christ. 23 But they were hearing only, "He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy." 24 And they glorified God in me.

The letter to the Galatians is one of the foremost sections of Scriptures that hits home with present day Christians. Not only is it addressed to those already in the faith, who have at least a working knowledge of the Bible. But it also addresses a modern-day problem. Paul's words are not prophetic, his initial audience needed this letter just as much as we do. But, it's quite astonishing how these thoughts reflect what we continue to experience here as Christians.

Speaking of astonishment, that's exactly where Paul begins. He "marvels" that the Galatians would so quickly turn away from the Gospel. Paul had a hand in establishing the churches in the area of Galatia, which would be the central area of modern day Turkey. He and Barnabas traveled through these provinces on their first missionary trip and started many churches. Paul's method was simple as seen in the book of Acts. He would go wherever people typically gathered and preach the direct Law and Gospel. Jesus Christ crucified and risen for fallen sinners.

It didn't take long for the power of this Word to fade in the peoples' hearts. But, it wasn't the Law they forsook, it was the Gospel. They had plenty of laws, even though not all came from God. Paul describes their plight by saying that they had turned to a "**different Gospel.**" The word Gospel simply means good news. The Bible's Gospel is all about the good news of sins forgiven in Jesus but every person has their own opinion about what constitutes good news. The Galatians had slipped into following a false good news, a different Gospel. It's no coincidence that the Greek word for different is where we get the word "heterodox," meaning different teaching. There is one, divinely inspired truth of God's Word and all other beliefs are different. And so, immediately, Paul sounds a warning for their lives. Don't turn from the true Gospel to a different one, no matter who preaches it! Think of it was very much the same as that initial audible warning on the *USS Stark*. We see in this first chapter, three points Paul stresses about what made this new gospel different, and for our lives they apply just as much.

Part 1: Trying to please people

We may think that trying to please people is a noble thing. Aren't we called to this as Christians when we're told to "love of our neighbors as ourselves?" Don't we want to be "all things to all people" as Paul wrote elsewhere? What about being kind and caring to others? Those things are all true, but that's not the kind of service Paul is speaking about. He tells us that trying to please people puts us at direct odds with God. You can't please men and honor God.

The kind of service we offer our neighbor is to flow from the service God has offered us. In other words, "we love because God first loved us." Paul's rebuke of the Galatians' heterodoxy could have easily been taken as an unloving thing. The same charge is often leveled against Christians today. People say we hate others for calling for repentance. Opponents say we think we're better than others for trying to live according to God's commandments. Even sincere Christians pick away at the Bible in a vain attempt to fit in better with the world. Paul brings the matter to light, do we care more about pleasing God or pleasing others? We should think carefully about the answer because the

wrong choice may put us at enmity with God. Paul calls it a direct attack on the Gospel and the first step toward hastening after a different Gospel.

True love for one another is hidden in Christ and revealed by the Holy Spirit. Truly pleasing our neighbor will never be at odds with God's revealed truth. In fact, anything opposed to the Word that claims to be love is a most dangerous lie.

Part 2: Following human traditions

Each warning gets more personal for Paul. He now shifts in verse 11 to talking about **how** he received the Gospel. It wasn't a human invention. It was a direct revelation from Jesus Christ. Anyone who claims to speak for God will always have to give their reasons why people should listen to them. Paul appeals to the absolute truth that God had called him for this purpose. He's talking about his conversion, the details of which are listed in three separate sections of Acts. You can tell that Paul cared deeply about his validity as a minister. He was well-educated. He was knowledgeable of the Bible. All indications point to his ability to speak. But, he never listed any of those qualities as a reason for people to listen to him.

In fact, to the Corinthians, Paul said this: **And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 5 so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (1 Corinthians 2:1-2, 5)**

The direct human tradition that the endangered the Galatians will be expanded upon as our series continues. We have our own pitfalls in our culture and in our churches, too, but they all come back to one thing – putting man's word above God's. Modern day Christians, included us, often like to point these examples out in the Bible, especially as they pertain to the Pharisees. After all, Jesus said to them, **7 Hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied correctly about you when he said: 8 These people honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. 9 They worship Me in vain, teaching as doctrines the commands of men." (Matthew 15:8-9)**

Paul was a student of this school and didn't hesitate to admit it saying, **And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.** It's easy to point out these glaring inconsistencies with the true Gospel; it's often harder to see how the Pharisaical hypocrisy affects our hearts. Have you ever thought, "I don't need to go to church because it doesn't hold my attention enough; I never get anything out of it anyway? Have you ever seethed with anger in your heart because your brother or sister rebukes your sin of pride, or gossip, or greed; and they just don't understand how complicated things are? Have you ever worried about what will become of our church in an ever-changing society and after years of seemingly no interest from our community? If you have then you have fallen prey to the same problem Paul had – trusting human words over God's.

For such sins we daily confess our repentance and ask for the Lord's mercy to renew us. Confidence in only the true Gospel gives pardon and peace, for it reminds us that no matter how we fail, Christ restores us freely by His grace. This is how little problems that have no direct relation to the Gospel actually prove to be quite important. This is why Paul doesn't back down from his warning call. Anything that leads you to trust something over God is a direct assault on the Gospel because it minimizes not only the Word of God but the need for Jesus Christ as Savior. Simply put, the Gospel changes you, you don't change the Gospel.

Part 3: Walking the comfortable path

Paul's final warning is his most personal one. Once God called him to faith it's not as if things simplified in his life. Actually, his walk of faith was a complicated one, and often Paul didn't understand the purpose. But, regardless, he trusted God. He was led to Arabia before Jerusalem. How it was three years before he saw Peter. How many of the Christians didn't know who he was. He had a need for personal training in his own heart before God used him as the super-apostle he would become. We think of Paul as the great missionary but it took a lot of behind the scenes work before he got there.

The same thing happens with all Christians. God has a distinct plan for each of you. If you feel nervous or uncertain about that plan; if things seem out of your control, don't panic. That's completely normal when the true Gospel is at work. There's always a steady uneasiness with the true Gospel. It should make us feel on edge a bit because we are still sinners. If we don't feel this edginess, we are probably changing the true Gospel. By nature, we don't want to hear the Gospel message, even though it is a wonderful message. We are corrupted. We are rebels of God. There's always a tension with the Gospel inwardly even though it is an absolutely liberating thing.

The person who is always in control is not walking by faith alone in the Son of God. Faith is trust, and that often involves the unknown. The Gospel of Jesus is the energy behind that walk of faith. Those who **must** have control at all costs, even if it's only in their minds and not in reality, are following something different.

How much more unlikely a story could there be than that God sent His own Son to suffer a divine punishment even though no human deserved it. How unknown a message it is that the Father would touch His perfect, holy Son with the eternal wrath of the righteous judge? Would any human think such a thing could be possible unless the Bible had indeed revealed it? Never. And yet, that's the precious Gospel, so simple, so spot on, so true to this life, that even a tiny child can get it. If the trade-off to not knowing everything or how God always leads you is eternal life in heaven, is it not worth it? Beware of this final warning call, the Christian life is not always straightforward and comfortable. Don't change the truth just to make it easier. This is a different path than God's.

Although warning signs are usually irritating interruptions, we turn them off at our own peril. Beware of shortchanging God's warnings in His Word and falling into a different Gospel. Paul took this so seriously that he would condemn anyone who changed it, saying whether man or angel, let them be cursed. This was not an overreaction, for one's stance on the Gospel of Christ is the very dividing line between heaven and hell. With all that Christ has won for us and the joy that is ours through it, there is just as much that can now be lost. God grant us the strength by faith to persevere in this life and to receive the next. In His Son's name, Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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