

WHEN THE GOSPEL GETS POLLUTED

BY DR. JERRY VINES

By the Book™ A Chapter by
Chapter Bible Study Series
from Jerry Vines Ministries
2295 Towne Lake Parkway
Suite 116 #249
Woodstock, GA 30189

Let's Begin

The great A.W. Tozer once said, "The Holy Spirit came to carry the evidence of Christianity from the book of apologetics into the human heart." While Tozer was writing in another era on a slightly different subject, he nevertheless captured Paul's purpose in the book of Galatians. In only a very short time, the Judaizers managed to corrupt the Gospel of Christ by transforming it from the good news of God's grace to the bad news of human works.

"I marvel," he wrote, "that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ" (vv. 6-7). The Apostle was set for the defense of the Gospel, the Gospel which was revealed to him by the Lord of the Gospel, Jesus Christ (v. 12).

As we begin our study of Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia, let's follow the outline below. The first chapter naturally flows into two sections:

I. Gospel Pollution (vv. 1-10)

II. God's Solution (vv. 11-24)

I. Gospel Pollution (vv. 1-10)

The letter to Galatians is different from all the other letters Paul wrote. It differs from his other writings where he takes time to make personal references to the positive factors about the church to which he writes. From the outset of the Galatians letter, something is wrong. Paul seems agitated, deeply moved to get quickly to the point. And, he bluntly makes it, "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel" (v. 6).

Paul is writing to combat the problem of Gospel pollution, the pollution of a message which tells a person how he or she can go to heaven. Indeed the most profound, significant question any living human being could ever ask pertains to how a person is saved. No wonder the Apostle was so quick to address it.

First, let's note the *defensive salutation* (vv. 1-5). The Apostle Paul was under attack. His apostolic credentials were being questioned. After all, his critics mourned, "Paul is not of the original twelve." Hence, Paul writes his opening line, "Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead" (v.1). The term translated "apostle" is the Greek word *apostolos*, which literally means, "he that is sent" (cp. John 13:16). In other words, an apostle was, generally speaking, a messenger. In this broad sense, the Bible speaks of Barnabas as an apostle. Even Jesus is considered an apostle (Heb. 3:1).

Paul's claim to apostleship came under fire in Galatia. With that in mind, Paul's opening is perfectly understandable. He starts by expounding on his *ministry*, insisting his appointment stood "not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father". The structure in the Greek places the focus on the negative—"not...neither." Rather, Jesus Christ appeared to him, calling him as an Apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9). Only God can make an apostle.

The most profound, significant question any living human being could ever ask pertains to how a person is saved.



In fact, only God can make a preacher. Our seminaries do not make preachers. Nor do they issue calls to pastors or even offer credentials to pastors. Preachers are born, not made. That is, God raises them up. The role of seminaries is to enhance the preacher's call and hone the preacher's skill. But if a man is not a preacher when he goes to seminary, nothing but a call from God can make him one, even if he graduates from seminary.

In addition, Paul mentions his *message*, "Grace be to you and peace from God the Father, and *from* our Lord Jesus Christ, Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father: To whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (vv. 3-5). Paul founded the churches in Galatia at great personal risk to his own life. And, even if he deals strongly with the Galatians, Paul is careful to mention the twin spiritual necessities of "grace" and "peace." Grace is the root of salvation and peace is the fruit. No one can have peace with God without grace from God anymore than an apple can be possessed apart from the apple tree!

Grace is the root of salvation and peace is the fruit.

Reflection Connection

Reflect on the presence of grace and peace in your own life. Do grace and peace characterize the atmosphere of your church? Explain.

The message of the finished work of Jesus Christ is clear. Paul affirms the *voluntary* aspect of the Gospel. He "gave himself." He laid His life down willingly. No one took His life from Him (John 10:18; Mark 10:45).

Paul further affirms the *vicarious* aspect of the Gospel. "Vicarious" is an apt description of the Gospel, for its meaning concerns *substitution*. Jesus Christ died on the cross in our place, or, as Paul says it, "for our sins." We deserved every pain the cross brought upon Jesus. Yet He freely took punishment in our stead.

Finally, Paul affirms the *victorious* aspect of the Gospel. He "delivered us" from this evil age. Salvation is Divine rescue coming down from heaven. God reaches down to a hopeless, rebellious sinful race and offers sinners the only life rope available—the Gospel of Jesus Christ. By placing our faith in Him, He saves us from this world to the world to come!

No one can escape the powerful clutches the world has over them. In a real sense, men without God are slaves to the tyranny of evil. The "prince of this world" blinds unbelievers to the truth. Only Christ can save. Only Christ does save!

Second, after Paul offers a *defensive salutation*, he deals with the *dangerous situation* (vv. 6-10). Unlike his other letters, there is no long thanksgiving to the recipients. Nor is there a prayer to God recorded for them. Rather a thunderbolt descends from the sky, "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him... unto another gospel... [to] pervert the gospel of Christ" (vv. 6-7). In these two verses, Paul issues two dangers.

The first danger is *deserting* the grace of Christ (v. 6a). Speaking in military terms, the Galatians were "removed" from Him. The verb is the present tense, so the Galatian believers were only in the process of turning, the turning was not



yet final. They were listening to false teachers who placed more importance on the law of Moses than they did on the life of Christ.

The New Testament reveals two basic ways of departure from the historic Gospel. On one hand, persons may desert grace through *license*. The Apostle Jude deals extensively with those who exit the Gospel through this door (Jude 4). On the other hand, they may exit through the door of *legalism*. As we shall learn in later verses, legalism is precisely the issue Paul faced with the churches of Galatia (cp. 5:4). Paul's response remained unequivocal: we are saved by grace, live by grace, and are kept by grace.

The second danger Paul issues is *perverting* the Gospel of Christ (vv. 6b-10). He stated not only were the Galatians apparently settling for another message, but it was "another gospel." Not that there can actually exist another Gospel. In fact, this cannot be. Instead, the Galatians were satisfying their spiritual thirst by an apostate gospel, a twisted, mangled message which could not deliver salvation.

What was the perversion? While we will examine this more as we progress through the letter, the change was a fundamental shift from a salvation by grace to a salvation by works. For Paul, the change was so substantial, he places an eternal curse on the newfound faith the Judaizers were peddling, "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any *man* preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" (vv. 8-9). Twice Paul uses the Greek term *anathema* which is translated by the English word, "accursed." It basically means "to be given over to eternal destruction." Paul was calling down Divine wrath on those who meddled with the Gospel in such a profound way.

Changing the message God gives is no light matter. Deceiving people into following a lie seals a person's fate to God's eternal displeasure. No one should attempt to change the good news of the Gospel. Every time the preacher proclaims the Bible's message, every time a teacher offers a "thus saith the Lord", is an occasion for marked humility and careful teaching. To add to the Scripture is to pervert the message. To take away is to condemn one's self.

Paul's response remained unequivocal: we are saved by grace, live by grace, and are kept by grace.

II. God's Solution (vv. 11-24)

The pollution to God's Gospel called for an immediate solution. Paul was not about to give up on the Galatians as quickly as they were giving up on the Gospel he taught them. What then is the solution?



After the initial correction, Paul takes the Galatians on a journey with him on the road to his own recovery. He tells them how he was saved and the powerful invasion of the Gospel into his own life. One of the most personal things you will ever do is share your testimony about coming to Christ. It is also one of the most powerful things you can ever do to win someone to Jesus Christ.

How do you think the early church won so many to the Lord? They had no witness-training programs. No “Evangelism Explosion” or “F.A.I.T.H” courses to pursue. Such programs have real value. Any time we can help someone share the Gospel, our resources are well spent. Rather, it is to say the most powerful tool you personally possess for Gospel witnessing is your own conversion experience!

Notice what Paul did. He simply took the Galatians through three routes of his pilgrimage with Jesus. The first route was his *past conduct*. Paul writes, “For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews’ religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it: And profited in the Jews’ religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers” (vv. 13-14).

*Any time
we can help
someone share
the Gospel,
our resources
are well spent.*

During this journey, Paul intends the Galatians to travel with him to life prior to his Damascus Road experience (Acts 9). And, just what keeps Paul’s wheels turning? According to his testimony, it was his “conversation.” The Greek word for “conversation” is *anastrophē*, which means so much more than what we gather from our English word alone. When we speak of conversation, we refer to words exchanged with one another, or, simply communicating with each other. And, while speech is included in the Greek, also included is one’s entire manner of life. In short, Paul spoke of his conduct, his patterns of behavior.

What was it about Paul’s conduct he wanted the Galatians to consider? First, his conduct toward the church: he *persecuted* it. He said “I persecuted...[I] wasted it.” Paul’s attitude and actions toward the people he now loves, sought to destroy them before he met Jesus. He was so adamant, he reveals his “madness” against them, “I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities” (Acts 26:11; cp. Acts 9:21).

In addition, Paul reveals his conduct toward religion: he *pursued* it. The very road about which Paul warned the Galatians he himself had travelled many miles. He was no stranger to the “Jews’ religion” and even “profited” from it. Paul studied under the greatest of all Jewish Rabbis, Rabbi Gamaliel. He graduated *summa cum laud!*

Not only so, but he pursued religion with a passion. Paul was “zealous” for his way of life. So dedicated, in fact, he was willing to kill others who rejected it, especially people of the sect known to him as “Christians.”

Reflection Connection

How significant do you see religion in our culture today? Do you think there are fewer religious people in places of influence? Why or why not? Does religion make people or culture better? If so, how?



Religious people may be the hardest people to reach with the Gospel. Being so forged in their ways and so set in their doctrines, no amount of evidence can untie the knot with which religion has bound them. However, the Gospel is powerful enough to do it. That is Paul's testimony. It is also ours!

The second route on which Paul takes the Galatians is the *powerful change* in his life. Note carefully his words, "But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called *me* by his grace, To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood" (vv. 15-16). A defining moment came. A radical change occurred. The radical change was a *supernatural* change. God "separated" him and "called" him to apostolic ministry. He was "set apart" to reach the Gentiles with the Gospel (Rom. 1:1; Acts 13:2).

God does the work in salvation. It is never anything we do. Not even our faith is considered to be "work." As Francis Schaeffer used to say, "Faith is but the empty hand lifted up to God." We are saved by faith not by works (Eph. 2:8-10). Salvation is of the Lord (Jonah 2:9).

The third route Paul takes us on is his *contacts* (vv. 16b-24). Note again as Paul affirms what happened when Christ invaded his life to commission him an apostle, "Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days. But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's brother" (vv. 17-19). The other Apostles neither influenced him nor laid hands on him to be an apostle for the church. Instead, he went to seminary in a desert place, there being taught by God Himself. He "conferred not with flesh and blood" (v. 16b).

In Arabia, Paul experienced *isolation* (v. 16); in Damascus, he experienced *preparation* (v. 17); and in Jerusalem, Paul gathered *information* (vv. 18-20). Even more significant to the Galatians, in Syria and Cilicia, others experienced the Gospel's *proclamation* as Paul journeyed about (vv. 21-24). Though relatively unknown at the time, he preached the message he once renounced, seeing souls changed because of the powerful change in his own life.

Golden Greek Nugget

Paul reminded the Galatians how he formerly "wasted" the church of God (v. 13). The Greek term translated "wasted" is *portheô*, which literally means "to ravage" or "to utterly destroy." In essence, it means to *annihilate*. Paul's deepest desire at that time was to exterminate the Christians. What a powerful, personal earth-quake took place in Paul's life. The same Gospel changes us today!

Wrap Up

Paul faced his most formidable opposition in Galatia. The Judaizers preached a message which sounded good but ended up sabotaging the Gospel of grace. Their message was polluted. And, the only sure remedy was the pure, unadulterated Gospel which Paul preached to them at the beginning. No one is exempt from error. We must always be on the watch for false doctrines which taint the Gospel and undermine the Biblical message of grace.

