

The Gospel of Christ

Galatians 1:1-12

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From Paul, an apostle, though not an apostle sent by people nor an apostle under the authority of any person but an apostle by the power of Jesus Christ and by God the Father who raised Jesus from the dead. And from all the brothers who are with him.

To the assemblies in Galatia.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself up for our sins such that we might be removed from this present, evil age according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen!

I am astonished that you are switching from the one who called you through grace to another gospel. Not that there is another gospel, except that some are causing you anxiety and are wanting to distort Christ's gospel. However, even if a heavenly messenger were to proclaim to you a gospel other than the gospel that has been preached to you ... I say: let him be cursed. I'll say again what I said before: if anyone preaches to you a gospel other than the gospel that has been preached to you, let him be cursed.

Do you think that I am trying to convince anyone by persuasive speech or to manipulate God by magic? Do you think that what I am doing is to try to please people? If what I was doing was still to please people, I would not be a slave to Christ.

For I am telling you, brothers, that the gospel that I preached was not a gospel created by any person. The gospel that I preached to you I did not receive from anyone nor was I taught it. The gospel that I preached came by revelation from Jesus Christ himself.

Let's say that all of your life, and all of the lives of your ancestors, you've always only ever lived in one country. All the people that you're related to come from the same region of the world, your country, or your little corner. Your language has been the same for centuries and your customs haven't changed much over the recent centuries, nor have your religious practices. Yes, there are outside influences, especially economic and military, especially if you're from a part of the world that has been the scene of military action and crisscrossing armies. You know about the world outside, but it is a bit of a mystery to you and you certainly don't know it well. What you have heard of it makes you think: we are much better off here where we are.

Sound like anyone you know?

Now, let's imagine that, for whatever reason, you have to move outside your little corner of the world into that larger world outside. You move to a completely new country, where people speak a language that you don't understand. Their customs are very different and their religious practices are not ones that you understand or like. In fact, many of the strike you as crazy, or idolatrous, or even evil.

Sound like anyone you know?

What do you do?

Well, one option is to create a ghetto. You can do what many Italian immigrants did when they came to Ottawa in the 60s and simply re-create here the little villages that they had left in Reggio Calabria or Sicilia. They would continue to speak their language, buy at their own shops, worship in their own churches in their own languages. They might even build homes, and churches, and stores that look like the ones that they had left.

Another option is to assimilate completely. To give up everything that you once knew and become a full citizen of that new world. Upon arrival, you would abandon those who came with you from the old country and begin to blend in completely. You would speak their language -- including the bad words, adopt their customs, their religious practices. You would wear clothes that everyone else wears, rather than the old country vestments. Pretty soon people would say about you: He's just one of us.

Now, to this point, you might have thought that I was going to be speaking this morning about challenges facing immigrants, including perhaps some of you here, whether immigrants from the old country that was Holland or newer immigrants from, say, Africa or the East. And all that I have said would be true.

But, this morning I want to speak to you about the apostle Paul, raised as a young man in the narrow, closed Jewish world of Jerusalem, where he studied with Gamaliel. Paul himself says that he was "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee" (Phil 3:5 RSV). As a pure Jew, Paul could have contact with non-Jews, Gentiles, but these contacts were to be minimal. They could be commercial. Anything more was not permitted. It was a closed culture. Think of present-day families living in the hills in Afghanistan, who when a non-Afghan comes to them, the women run and hide and the men cower in fear.

Paul also says that this was the world of his ancestors. In fact, he says, he was of the tribe of Benjamin, that is, that he had been born into the same line of Jews as King Saul. That, by the way, is probably also the reason that Paul the Apostle's Jewish name was "Saul". It was the name used in his family for centuries as a reminder of their royal lineage. So, he wasn't just a nominal Jew, a cultural Jew, but a member of the royal family of Jews, going back a thousand years!

But, Paul was even more than that! He was a law-abiding Jew of the first-order, a Pharisee. Pharisees believed that the WHOLE LAW of Moses, even the parts intended for the priests, was something that the WHOLE people of Israel were to do if they were to be good Jews. After all, God had said to Moses: "Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:5-6 RSV). The Pharisees taught that to be fully pleasing to God, all Israel was to keep the Law that God had commanded.

But, finally, Paul says: I wasn't just a good Jew, a member of a thousand year old royal line of Jews, a member of the strictest sect of law-abiding Jews ... Paul says that he also did his part to ensure that this community remained pure. That's why, Paul says, he persecuted the church. Because he saw the followers of Jesus as violating that holiness which God required of Israel, by regularly ignoring the Law and even by proclaiming as Messiah one whom God had clearly cursed since he had been executed on a tree. Paul was willing to do anything to uphold the law and he was willing to do anything necessary to ensure that no one challenged or violated the Law. He was so zealous for the Law that like Phineas he was willing to kill for the Law. Again, Afghanistan comes to mind. Violators of the Law, Christians like Stephen, were to be stoned.

What did Paul think about everyone else in the world, the non-Jews, the Gentiles? As we know from the literature of the Pharisees from Paul's day, Paul would have felt that they deserved death and that in the end God would destroy them and give the whole earth over to His people Israel. So, why bother with the gentiles? Avoid them and don't suffer their fate. It was not a very different view from that of Muslim fundamentalists today who believe that in the end all infidels will either submit to Allah or will be destroyed as God hands the earth over to those of the true faith.

And then one day, on his way from Israel to Syria, specifically to Damascus, to round up those Christians who were polluting the faith of Israel, Paul was stopped in his tracks by Jesus himself who spoke to him from his heavenly

throne. Paul's subsequent conversion, his becoming a follower of the man Jesus, would have been dramatic enough. But, Jesus didn't leave Paul there. No, he took this most fervent and militant of Jews and said to him that from now on Paul was going to serve Jesus by leaving the old world, the world that he had known so well and for whose values he had fought, and Paul was now going to go into the chaotic, idolatrous, immoral, violent, and very unholy world of the Gentiles to proclaim Jesus to them to save them.

This was unbelievable. It took time for many Christians to believe what God had done to Paul. Imagine what his fellow Pharisees thought!

Some of the first people to whom Paul was sent lived in central Asia Minor, a land called Galatia. They would have been a mixed bag of peoples: a few would have been Romans who lived there as administrators and soldiers. There also would have likely been some Jews there, who perhaps had gone there for commercial reasons. But, the vast majority of people who lived there would have been natives to the land. If they were original to the land, as Frisians are to Frisia, they would have been descended from the same peoples who eventually spread throughout Europe to France, Spain, Ireland, Wales, and Scotland, in other words, Gauls, people of Celtic origins. Imagine what these peoples were like in the 1st century: wild, immoral, violent... All of the above.

Though we don't have the transcript of what Paul first preached to them, he reminds them in vs. 4 of his letter to them of what he had preached to them. It was this. First, he had told them about this person named Jesus, who had given himself as a sacrifice for sins. Second, he told them that, in doing so, Jesus had freed them from this present, evil age. Third, he told them what Jesus had done was the Father's good will. Those 3 points contain in a nutshell the whole Gospel, the whole announcement of the good news as Paul preached it. This statement of what the gospel is, in a nutshell, is one of the earliest records of what we know of what anyone preached regarding Jesus. It is likely what Paul preached as the gospel of Christ wherever he went among the gentiles.

The gospel, the good news, starts with the assertion that Jesus gave himself like a sacrifice for sins. This is good news that Jews would have understood but would have been confused by. Surely animal sacrifice atones for sin. How can a man's blood atone for sin? They would have also found it blasphemous to assert that God had Himself died for human sins. This assertion was a huge stumbling block for Jews.

But, what would the Galatians or any other Gentile have thought? They would almost assuredly have wondered at it. 'What? God didn't just descend from heaven to fight in battles, like those of Troy, but to die on the battlefield of life, where men and women violate and act unjustly against each other and against God himself? And he did this in order that war and injustice and violation might end and death itself might eventually come to an end? And he did this freely? He was under no obligation to do this? Tell us more! This is an amazing story!' The gentiles loved stories of heroic sacrifice on the field of battle. But, this Jesus, giving himself not for his friends, but for his enemies... this is indeed a strange but compelling story? It's not surprising that they were enchanted by it and wanted to know more.

And this would have led Paul to the second aspect of the gospel: from what had Christ freed us in his death? Surely, we here today rejoice that we have been released from our sins. But, honestly, we also probably say in your hearts: but, I really wasn't that bad, was I? And it's almost assuredly true. The little peccadillos that Western men and women think about when they think about sin are really obnoxious little ethical quirks that we all have to deal with. A little cheating here, a little sneak at a bad picture there, a bad word here, an unkind thought there, a bit of gossip and complaining here.

But, these people in Paul's day? These people lived in a world that, as the Pharisees believed, deserved to be destroyed. Watch the TV series "Rome"; watch the TV series "Spartacus". You'll see what kind of a world Paul entered: a world of vicious violence, of sexual promiscuity that makes even the extremes of Las Vegas look like, well, like calm, placid Ottawa. The world that the Galatians, and the Macedonians, and others knew was a world in which demons and disease hold the poor captive, a world in which slaves are the majority and in which those who are free are a handful of the rich, the 1% of the 1% of the population of that time. It was a world that looked more like a 19th century prison than it did like anything that you and I have known, unless you have known the world of Nazi Germany, of imperial Japan, of Maoist China, of Stalinist Russia... You get the point. But, this was the world from which Jesus had freed them.

Paul proclaimed that Jesus had freely entered this world, making himself into an offering on the altar of a Roman cross and tomb, and that he did so to free men and women from this evil world... to free this woman from demon-possession, this slave from his shackles, this man from the sword, this woman from a life of prostitution.

And it happened, in Galatia, and elsewhere, as these freed men and women became members of God's one holy catholic and apostolic church, scattered throughout the known world in little assemblies of the faithful. That freeing gospel caught on to such an extent that within a few generations the whole known world had been touched by it, as men like Paul raced throughout the world proclaiming that deliverance and freedom in Christ. Why, they raced to the end of the earth in Spain, to the farthest corners of the world like Frisia and Holland and Sweden... and thus you and I end up here this morning, thanking God for His grace.

And that is the third point: all this happened because it was God's gracious will that it happen. The Father, by His gracious will and love, intended it all from the beginning and brought to all to fruition at just the right time, Paul will say later in this letter. This is the faith of the church as that faith has come down to us: At the centre of the gospel "that the apostles, and the Church following them, are to proclaim to the world" is the truth that "God's saving plan was accomplished 'once for all' (Heb 9:26) by the redemptive death of his Son Jesus Christ" and that that "Gospel is the revelation in Jesus Christ of God [the Father]'s mercy to sinners (Luke 15)".¹

What a contrast between the love of this true God for all people and what the Galatians and all the gentiles had experienced at the hands of their own gods, gods that they and their ancestors had only ever known. For one of the only things that the Galatians, like other Gentiles, had only ever known in their cultures was fear of the gods. Their gods could do anything but they were so capricious and so whimsical that at any moment they might change their minds: they might bless you at one moment, and then destroy the ship on which you were sailing, just to have a good laugh at your expense.

In stark contrast, one of the pillars of the gospel that Paul preached was that God was good... always. Yes, the true God is great and powerful-- Allahu akhbar. There is no religion in the world that thinks that their gods are not great. But the third of the three pillars of the good news, the gospel, that Paul proclaimed was not only that God was powerful but that God is good and He is always good. He is not capricious. He is not changing. If you are in His care, then all that happens to you happens for a good reason, even though you might not always understand it. For He is the same God who brought all things into being and who, in spite of our disobedience and resulting enmity towards him, has always kept his covenant with humanity. The gods who are changing and capricious and whimsical? These are gods made in our image, for we are the ones who in our desires and in our promises, in our lives and in our deaths, are changing and capricious and whimsical. So, when we make god in our own image, is it surprising that it is a god very much like us that we make... and that eventually we end up fearing?

And so, my friends, most of whom here this morning believe this gospel that Paul preached to the Galatians, I leave you with a question: Who would ever want to give this up?

It's an excellent question. Paul writes his letter to the Galatians to bring them back to this gospel that he has preached to them, gospel in which they heard of God coming into their midst to save them and free them from the sinful world in which they found themselves, all because of love. Why would anyone give this up? The Galatians could and they had. Why? Because something that they found even better than what Paul had offered to them was now being offered to them. What was that? It was the gospel of man. If you want to know what that was, why it was so compelling to the Galatians that they were willing to give up the gospel that Paul proclaimed, and why it remains so compelling today that many are still faced with the temptation to give up the true gospel of Christ for it ... come back next week and see why. For now, let us pray.

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 571 and 184, emphasis added.