

A Different Gospel

In the name of him who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, dear friends in Christ: “If you can’t say anything nice about someone, don’t say anything at all.” How many of you were taught that when you were young? How many learned it from your mother? It seems to me that the rule usually has the preamble, “My mother always said ...” Uh huh ... most of you. It makes me think there’s a universal manual for mothers out there which contains such bits of wisdom that are to be passed down from generation to generation. But if that’s true, then the mother of St. Paul never got it. Or if she did, she didn’t manage to impress this particular lesson on her son.

This morning’s Epistle reading is the opening of St. Paul’s letter to the Christian churches in Galatia. Following the standard letter writing format of the time, he begins by identifying himself: “Paul an apostle” – that is, someone who is sent as an authoritative messenger – “not from men nor through a man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.” He’s doing more than saying who he is; he’s also establishing his “creds”. He’s almost like an FBI agent flashing his badge. He wants his readers to know that he writes with an authority far greater than his own, or any other human authority for that matter. He’s writing to them on behalf of Jesus Christ and God the Father who sent him to save the world.

Now, the people in the congregations at Galatia already know Paul. After all, he founded their churches on his first mission journey, and he revisited each one as he began his second mission trip. They were the congregations at Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, and several other places which are mentioned in the book of Acts. These churches are the first fruits of Paul’s ministry of spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And as such they are very dear to his heart.

But what would normally follow in any one of Paul’s letters is a compliment of some kind: “I’ve been hearing great things about your faithfulness, or your generosity, or the love you have for one another, or the way you’ve been standing firm in the face of persecution” – something like that. But not in his letter to the Galatians. No. Instead Paul begins blasting away with harsh words of criticism, effectively jumping down their throats with both feet without bothering to wipe the mud off his boots. “I am utterly astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel, which is no gospel at all.” His words seethe with fury and frustration. It’s the verbal equivalent of grabbing them by the collar with one hand and using the other to slap them repeatedly across the face while shouting WHAT! IS! WRONG! WITH! YOU!?

And please understand that this seemingly rude behavior on Paul’s part is not borne of malice or spite for the Galatian Christians, but rather of genuine love and concern. He’s like a parent who berates a child that insists upon running into a busy street without any sense of the danger involved. A parent in that situation would ask, “What’s wrong with you? Don’t you know you could be killed?” In a far greater sense Paul is upset because the Galatians are in danger of throwing away the eternal life they have in Christ. They’re not blindly running into the street. They’re hurling themselves headlong into hell. This is why Paul is so forceful. This is why he breaches all the rules of protocol and good manners. He’s trying to impress upon the Galatians just how grave their situation is – because they don’t see it themselves.

What happened is this: after Paul got these churches up and running, founding them on the simple truths of the Gospel – stressing that they were saved by grace through faith in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ for sin without any work, merit, or worthiness of their own – there came along some wolves in sheep’s clothing, false teachers who led the churches in Galatia astray. You see, most of the believers in Galatia were Gentile Christians. That means before coming to faith in Jesus they weren’t practicing all the Jewish religious traditions. They knew nothing of circumcision, the Jewish feasts and festivals, the Sabbath laws, and the dietary restrictions that the Law of Moses called for. And Paul didn’t bother to teach the Gentile believers these things because they were all foreshadows – things that pointed to and were fulfilled in and by Christ. They no longer served a purpose. Once the butterfly emerges, it discards its cocoon – and so it was with these kinds of Old Testament laws and ordinances.

But that’s not the way these false teachers called Judaizers saw it. They thought these rules were still in effect – that they were patterns for godly living. They came along and said, “Wow, it’s really great that you folks have come to believe in Jesus; but you know, that’s only the first step to becoming a *real* Christian. The Scriptures are filled with all these rules that God wants his people to obey to set them apart and make them truly righteous in his sight.” They told the new converts, “So here’s the good news: even though you are Gentiles and not Jews, now that you’ve come to Christ, the Lord wants you to live like Jews. In that way you’ll show yourselves to be true believers and lead lives that please the Lord.”

To many people in the Galatian congregations, this made sense. What the Judaizers were teaching had a ring of religious truth. Why would the Lord give his people all those rules if he didn’t want them to obey them? And if by following these rules we can make the Lord happy, well, then it’s only right that we adhere to them. Who doesn’t want to have a life that pleases the Lord? And if all it takes to please him is having our males circumcised and dressing in a certain way and not working on Saturdays and avoiding pork and shellfish in our diet – yeah, we can do that.

Paul, perhaps better than anyone, saw the danger in this line of thinking. He knew that it was one of Satan’s oldest and most effective lies for leading astray and destroying the sheep of God’s flock. The essential questions are these: What makes a person a Christian? On what does our salvation depend? How is a person counted righteous before God? Is it faith in Jesus and what he accomplished on the cross by his sacrificial suffering and death? **Or** is it faith in Jesus **and** something else that has to do with the believer; be it following certain rules, or performing certain tasks, or having a spiritual experience of some kind - whatever? Is it faith in Jesus alone **or** faith in Jesus **and**?

Here’s what it is: The Gospel is good news. It’s the proclamation of what Jesus has done for you by his death for sin and his resurrection to life. If you add *anything* to it that has to do with you and your part in sealing the deal, then it’s not good news anymore because now it depends on you and what you do. And you’re a sinner. And sinners can’t be relied upon to do *anything* right. If you have a part, you *will* mess it up. And thus the good news becomes for you the bad news that you cannot and will not be saved. In Lutheran circles we call this adding Law to Gospel. And when it happens, all you end up with is Law. And Law always condemns sinners.

This is why Paul is so emphatic: “Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you another gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed!” It’s strong language – the strongest possible. And he says it twice. He’s calling upon God to condemn

and destroy anyone (himself included) who teaches that to faith in Christ must be added some work or worthiness of our own. That's a different gospel, which is no Gospel at all.

Friends, I have to warn you that even today, some nineteen hundred and fifty years after Paul wrote to the Galatians, this is still a huge problem in the Christian church. It comes in a lot of different forms; but it all amounts to this: Faith in Jesus gets you in the door with respect to salvation, but after that it's up to you to make yourself righteous before the Lord. Your salvation depends on Jesus and his work **and** some contribution of your own.

And look, the people who teach this stuff have good intentions. They want believers in Christ to obey the Law of God, which is a good thing. But it's not the Gospel. It's a different gospel – it's no gospel, and it's possible to fall into the trap of teaching it without even realizing it. Just to give you an example, a week ago Thursday there appeared an article in the local paper in the *Ask the Pastor* column. I've shown it to some of you. The pastor who writes the column is not Lutheran and we have significant theological differences; but with respect to the fundamentals of the Gospel, I know him to be a faithful Christian man. Anyway, the question put to the pastor was this: How can I know for sure that I'm saved?

In his reply, the pastor said that there are a lot of people who believe themselves to be Christians who really don't have faith in Christ. I think he had in mind those whose names appear on a church roll somewhere – or maybe did once upon a time – or maybe it was their parents or grandparents who were members of a church (you get the idea); but who are in fact essentially un-churched, haven't got a clue what the Bible actually teaches, who are living in ongoing and unrepentant sin, and who only mention the name of Jesus Christ when using it ... well, let's just say in a less than reverent manner. He said such people should have no assurance of their salvation, even though many of them do completely without cause. So far so good. But then he went on to say that if you want to know for certain that you are going to heaven, you must believe in Jesus Christ and his sacrifice for you on the cross (good ...). You must love him more than anything else (uh oh!). And you must obey him (and now we're completely sunk). He made assurance of salvation dependent upon Jesus **and**; and in so doing, he proclaimed a different gospel, which is no Gospel at all.

Maybe it was divine providence, but Monday morning when I started working on this text I couldn't stop thinking about what he'd written. I felt compelled to say something to him, and not just for his sake, but also for all those who read his column. But it's always a little awkward to do this. Pastors are people too. And (like everyone else) they don't like to be criticized by other pastors. This is especially true when the criticism crosses denominational lines, if you catch my drift. But I'm sitting there with this text in front of me. So I sent him an E-mail. In it (while attempting to be more tactful than St. Paul addressing the Galatians – something I'm sure many of you don't think I'm capable of) I said the assurance you give with your right hand by pointing to the saving work of Christ, you take back with your left by adding to the Gospel the love and obedience of the believer. The result is that the only thing you've assured me of is that I am going to hell. I don't love Christ more than anything else. I'd like to; but as a sinner it's not within me. I love myself more than anything else. That's what it means to be a sinner. Nor am I obedient to Christ who, among other impossibly high hurdles, commands that I be perfect as his Father in heaven is perfect. This is why I need a Savior as great as the one God sent in his Son; a Savior who loves me more than he loves himself and gave himself on the cross for me, a Savior who was obedient to the Law of God for me.

Fortunately, rather than take offense, the pastor in question agreed, and he thanked me for pointing out his confusion of Law and Gospel. In a future column he's going to amend his

statements and bring the true Gospel to the forefront. And I mention this not to put him down or raise myself up; but rather to demonstrate how easy it is even for someone who knows and trusts the Gospel of Jesus Christ, without intention, to turn to a different gospel.

This is why in our own circles we go to great lengths to stress only the true Gospel. We want you to hear it again and again so that you are not led astray. And so you hear it in the words of absolution when the pastor proclaims the forgiveness of your sins for Christ's sake. You hear it whenever we have a Baptism. You say it when you recite the Creed. Note that the words of the Creed are all about the Lord and what he does for us and not a word about what we are supposed to do for him. You hear it in the hymns we sing. Hopefully you hear the pure Gospel when the pastor preaches. And just to be sure you hear it again when you kneel here before the altar and you receive the very body and blood of Christ Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins. It's all about grounding your faith on the true Gospel so that you will trust in it and recognize and reject different gospels when you hear them.

And hear them you will. There are a lot of them out there. There's the gospel of health that says Jesus will heal all your sicknesses. There's the gospel of wealth that says Jesus wants you to be rich and successful. There's the gospel of inclusion, that says Jesus welcomes and saves everyone regardless of their lifestyles, their sexual orientations, or what they actually believe about him or anything else; all that matters is that we get along and not judge anyone. These are different gospels. Thus they are no Gospel at all. And chief among them is the one that says to faith in Christ must be added some work of man.

Therefore let us be on guard, and turn from all other gospels that originate in the minds and hearts of humans, and cling steadfast in faith to the only true Gospel that comes by revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!