

No Other Gospel

In the name of him who redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, dear friends in Christ: In last week's service, I said that here at the beginning of the long non-festival season – the many numbered Sundays after Pentecost in which we concentrate on growing in Christian faith and life – we start by reviewing the basics. Last week it was the foundation, the thing on which everything else stands; namely Christ's triumph over death. Sin brings death to us, but Jesus gives life to we who are dead in trespass by taking away our sins. He suffered for them. He died for them. And then he rose again to show that he paid the debt in full. And because he lives, we too will live. That's where the Christian faith begins. Everything else follows.

The next question is what's our part in this? How do we first become and then remain participants in what Jesus did to save us? This is what Paul is addressing in today's Epistle, which is a portion of his letter to the churches in the province of Galatia. We've been hearing sections of this letter for the past several weeks, and we will continue to do so for the next three. So a brief overview is in order to help us understand what he's saying and why.

We begin with little history: Paul preached the Gospel of Christ throughout Galatia on his first mission journey. He planted churches in several of the cities there including Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium. Setting out a few years later on his second mission journey, he revisited these congregations to see how they were getting along. It gave him the opportunity to encourage them, answer their questions, and clear up any misunderstandings they had. When he decided that it was time to move on to bring the Gospel to places he had not yet been, he thought he was leaving them in pretty good shape. And so they were.

Ah, but then came the Judaizers. These were believers in Jesus with Jewish roots and upbringing who had a different take on the Gospel. They descended on the Galatian churches, which were composed almost entirely of non-Jewish or Gentile believers. The Judaizers taught them that in order to be true Christians, they had to keep all the laws and traditions that God gave to the Israelites through Moses. They told them their males needed to be circumcised, that they had to observe all the dietary restrictions of the Jews like not eating pork or shellfish, and that they had to keep the seventh day Sabbath and the other Jewish feasts and festivals. And the Galatians believed them. After all, the Judaizers could show them these things straight out of the Scriptures. "This is how the Lord wants his people to live. You're one of his people now. So obey these laws." It made perfect sense.

It was also perfectly wrong. The Gospel of Jesus Christ isn't about keeping laws; not ceremonial laws given exclusively to the Israelites that were designed to point to Christ and were all fulfilled in him, and not even moral laws that speak to matters of right and wrong like not lying, stealing, murdering, or committing adultery. The reason we need the Gospel is because for us the Law is a dead end. It's true that the Law promises life to those who keep it perfectly, but it completely condemns anyone who breaks it. And that's the problem. We all broke it. And we keep breaking it with every thought we think, every word we speak, and every deed we do. What's more we break it also by not thinking the right thoughts we should have, not speaking the right words we should speak, and not doing the right things we ought to do. On the scale of righteousness the Law gives us each a score of absolute zero. So if our salvation depends even a tiny bit on keeping the Law, we're sunk.

Again, this is why our only hope is in the Gospel: the Gospel that tells us God the Son came down to earth, assumed human flesh and blood in the person of Jesus Christ, and lived for us the perfect life free of sin that we could not live ourselves. He then gave that life on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for our sin, suffering in his body the damnation and death we deserved. He did this because the justice of God had to be carried out against sin. Jesus then rose from the dead on the third day and began to proclaim forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life not to those who trust in their own efforts to keep the Law, but to sinners who trust in what *he did* to save them. This is the righteousness of God that comes not of doing, but of believing. It's the righteousness that God imputes by faith to those who trust in the saving work of Jesus. To those who are by faith in Christ, God awards a perfect score on the righteousness scale. It's the score Jesus earned for them.

And you can't add anything to it. No indeed, any attempt to add your own contribution to your already perfect righteousness score in Christ can only be done by taking away some of what Christ has done. This is why the teachings of the Judaizers were so destructive. They were saying, "Yes, trust in Jesus, of course; but then *do* this, this, and this in order to be counted righteous in the sight of God." It totally undermines the Gospel. It shifts trust away from the already accomplished work of Christ to something I must do to save myself. And so I'm back under the Law, which we've already seen is a dead end.

Now, pretty much Paul's whole letter to the Galatian churches is about refuting the false doctrine of the Judaizers. He's relentless about it precisely because he knows how attractive it is to think that we have some part in saving ourselves. And he knows that Satan is devilishly clever in coming up with ways to tempt us to think that we do. He'll do anything to twist, distort, or hide the true Gospel in such a way that it loses its power to save – and he'll do it in way that appears on the surface to be right and that sounds biblical—but isn't.

And this can be so subtle. In the passages that immediately precede this morning's text, Paul recounts something that happened earlier at the Christian church in Antioch, which was the first major congregation composed almost entirely of Gentile believers. Paul served there for several years as their pastor and teacher before he became a full time missionary. Anyway, it happened in the course of events that the Apostle Peter paid the church a visit, staying with them for some weeks or months. And you can imagine how he would have been looked up to. Unlike Paul, who came to faith later, this is the man who was with Jesus throughout his whole ministry. He saw the miracles first hand. He heard the Lord's teachings from his own lips. For goodness sake, this is the man who walked on water. He was a Christian super star. The congregation would have been in awe of him.

Now, when Peter was with them, he mingled freely with them. He went into their Gentile homes, he sat at their tables eating their Gentile food; he didn't worry about keeping kosher. But then a delegation of other Christian Jews came from Jerusalem. And these leaned more toward the thinking of the Judaizers. Though Christians, mostly out of force of habit and tradition, they did keep themselves kosher. Peter could see immediately that they weren't comfortable doing things the Gentile way, and that they disapproved of him for getting so close and cozy with the members of the congregation. So Peter drew himself back. He stopped eating with the Gentile believers and mingling with them so closely. Instead he hung out mostly with these guys from Jerusalem and lived according to their Jewish traditions.

Peter didn't say a word against the Gospel nor would he ever, but his actions preached a powerful sermon that the Gentile believers at Antioch understood all too well. "We aren't as

good or righteous as those Jewish Christians who follow all their old rules and traditions. No, to be a true Christian, we have to live like them.”

To Paul, serving as the pastor of these poor people being led astray – away from Christ and to trust in their own works – this was intolerable. And so it happened one fine Sunday morning in the middle of a church service that Paul called Peter out in front of the whole assembly. He accused Peter of destroying the Gospel by his actions which told the Gentile believers they had to live like Jews.

This is where today’s text picks up with Paul saying that we Jewish believers know this: that a person is not justified by works of the Law but through faith in Jesus Christ. A bit later he says, “If I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor.” He’s referring to the wall in the temple that used to divide Jewish believers from Gentiles who worshipped the One True God. In Christ, that wall is removed. There is no distinction between Jew and Gentile in the kingdom of God. Paul says if I try to put that wall up again – by insisting that Gentile believers who don’t keep kosher are somehow less righteous – then *I’m* the sinner.

He goes on to say what the Law is for. He writes, “For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved my and gave himself for me.” He means the Law is meant to kill sinners. It’s to show them the futility of trying to work toward their own salvation. People dead in sin can only produce dead works. The dead in sin can only look to Christ. They can only be baptized into his death and thus be crucified with him. And then they are raised with him. And he lives in them by faith so that their lives are hidden in him.

Paul says, “I do not nullify the grace of God”. This is key: any addition to the Gospel, anything we must do ourselves to complete our righteousness in God’s sight, totally negates the grace of God. Grace is all about gift. It’s all God’s doing. Grace that has a price tag attached however small, isn’t grace at all. And that’s why Paul says, “If justification were through the Law, then Christ died for no purpose.” Either he does it all in his death for sin, or he does nothing. Why? It’s because the person who thinks it’s in part up to me won’t be looking at Christ, he’ll be looking at himself and his own contribution.

And look, this wasn’t just a problem in the first century with the churches in Galatia; this has been the number one false doctrine that has plagued the Christian Church and undermined the Gospel throughout its history. Consider the Middle Ages when the church was teaching the way to be a better Christian was to take holy orders, join a monastery or convent, remain celibate, and devote your life to prayer and fasting. Though not quite as overt, that’s still being taught today. Other strains of it spill over into the Protestant tradition. If you visit your typical Evangelical church, you’re less likely to hear about what Jesus has done for you than you are to hear a number of personal testimonies. People will stand up and say what terrible sinners they used to be and how much better they are doing since “giving their life to Jesus”. Friends, we don’t give our lives to Jesus. That’s not the Gospel. The Gospel is that he gave his life for us. And there is no other Gospel.

Now, there may yet remain a nagging doubt in the back of your mind. I said at the beginning of this message that the long Pentecost season was about growing in Christian faith *and life*. And I’ve had a lot to say about faith; but I haven’t said anything about how we are to live our lives. There’s a reason for that. It’s because the Christian life flows out of the faith. The virtues we want to see like love, kindness, compassion, charity, and mercy – these are fruit

that come from trusting in Jesus and his work to save. We see this clearly in today's reading from St. Luke. Jesus is dining in the home of a self-righteous Pharisee who turns out to be a pretty lousy host. He doesn't pay Jesus the common courtesies expected in that day and age. Enter the woman with a soiled reputation. She knew where she stood in the sight of God: with a score of absolute zero. But then she met Jesus. He forgave her many sins. And she believed it. She trusted this good news from the mouth of Jesus. And that transformed her. It made her a new woman. Now she loves much because she was forgiven much. Her faith saved her. And so our faith in Jesus and his saving grace and forgiveness will also save us. And it will work in us the love of God as it did for her. There's no other way to do it because there is no other Gospel. Let's trust in the one Jesus gave us. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!