

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL TRUTH? Galatians 1:6-9, 11-12; 15-16; 2:1-6

Objective: To help each of us to gain a clearer understanding of the gospel message.

I just happened to watch part of a National Geographic program on the Amish communities in which the youth (at age 16) are allowed (required) to make a decision regarding joining the Amish church and be baptized. The children are allowed to experience the “English” world before making their choice. The program highlighted the struggles these youth were going through and consequences of their choices. There was a lot of talk about becoming part of the church and following the traditions and how important this was if they were going to make it to heaven. The Amish are thought to be a group with very high morals. Having a high moral standard is certainly good; however, I did not hear anyone (youth or adults) express anything that showed they had any understanding of “salvation by grace, through faith.”

There is a sect called Jehovah Witnesses that says there are four requirements for salvation: The first is to have knowledge of God and His purpose regarding the earth and of Jesus Christ and His role as earth’s new King. The second is to conform your life to the moral requirements set out in the Bible. The third is to be associated with God’s organization. The fourth is to advocate His Kingdom rule to others. (There is no mention of grace in these.)

There are various requirements by the Mormons, the Church of Christ, the Roman Catholics, Judaism, and Islam for salvation that go beyond salvation by grace through faith. There are people who will point out what they perceive to be conflicting statements in the Bible that says only the doers of the law will be saved and in another place that doing of the law will not save you. Many like to try to pit the claims of Paul against James’ letter and its emphasis on faith apart from works being dead. Over the next 13 weeks, in our studies of Paul’s letter to the Galatian church and James’ letter to Jewish Christians we will see what the Bible teaches and will show that there is only **one** gospel message. We will start with Paul epistle to the Galatians.

The Galatia area is part of modern Turkey. It was northeast of the island of Cyprus and some of the cities in that area were Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. Paul had visited this area during his first missionary journey and churches had been started. The time period of the letter was pretty close to AD 50. It was not long after Paul had been to the area that some Jewish Christians had come there and they had questioned the authenticity of Paul’s ministry as to whether he was an apostle. They also had their own ideas as to what was required to be saved. They essentially said that one had to practice Judaism in addition to trusting in Christ. The new converts to Christianity in the Galatia area were easily swayed, they accepted what Paul said and they then added what the Judaizers told them. They didn’t have a reference book where they could check out what they were being told and they were not very familiar with the Old Testament writings. They were vulnerable to whatever teaching that might come along.

There are groups today that go from house to house and try to make converts to their way of thinking about salvation. They have some success because most people today are not familiar with what the Bible teaches and the false teaching is “close” to the truth. Typically, their teachings confuse the questions of cause and effect and want to add human effort to the grace of God.

When we think of troubled churches in the first century, the church at Corinth usually comes to mind. There were significant problems there that involved immaturity and failure of the people to apply kingdom principles to their lives. It would seem that Paul was more concerned about the Galatian churches than the Corinth church since the Galatians had

abandoned the foundational doctrines that Paul taught them for an alternative way of salvation. Their problem was not immorality and pride and jealousy as was so evident in the Corinth church, it was that the Galatian churches had gotten on the wrong road. The problem with being on the wrong road is that, no matter how well you drive, you still wind up in the wrong destination.

Paul started his letter to the churches of Galatia by identifying himself and his basis of authority. We will explore the details of the points he made with regard to his calling and the source of his message. He wrote this letter to correct false information that had been given to the church in the area by the Judaizers. The points we want to cover in our study can be grouped into the following topics: Being able to recognize the gospel truth, having confidence that the truth of the gospel has its origins with God, and to resolve to not accept a compromise.

Recognize the True Gospel

⁶ I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; ⁷ which is *really* not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! ⁹ As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed! Galatians 1:6-9 (NASB95)

It is difficult to discern the emotions in a letter - especially one that was written nearly 2000 years ago and in a different language. However, it doesn't take a lot of imagination to figure out that Paul was really upset by what had happened in Galatia. Those Jewish Christians who taught that a person needed to convert to Judaism before becoming a Christian came into the area and created chaos. Not only were they teaching a false doctrine, they were claiming that Paul had no authority to establish churches and teach what he had preached to them. You can imagine how confused these brand-new Christians of Galatia must have been.

You might wonder why the people of Galatia would have embraced the gospel when Paul brought it to them on his first missionary journey. When he was in Antioch of Pisidia he approached the Jews living in the area to share the gospel message with them. Most of them rejected the message, but the Gentiles in the area wanted to hear more. Eventually, the entire city came out to hear Paul's message. The Jews reacted poorly and tried to stir up the people against Paul but it did not work at first. This was where Paul told the group of Jews that since they judged themselves to be unworthy of eternal life that he was turning to the Gentiles. Many of these believed the gospel, but the Jews eventually were successful in stirring up so much trouble that Paul and Barnabas left there and went to Iconium. While they were there, signs and wonders took place and many Jews and Gentiles believed and (of course) many did not. Eventually, they had to leave there and went to Derbe and Lystra. In Lystra a man was healed who had been crippled from birth. The people were sure that Barnabas was Jupiter and Paul was Mercury and they were about to offer a sacrifice to them. Paul, of course, would not allow this to happen, but this incident did allow Paul a chance to present to them the gospel message. Word of 'what had happened' spread throughout the region.

To say that these people were not "grounded" in correct doctrine would be an understatement. They had been given the correct doctrine but it was still new to them. So when Jewish Christians came into the area some time later and presented a different version of what God was doing, they were vulnerable to being deceived. These Jewish Christians had simply added the requirement of belief in Jesus as the Messiah to their other beliefs that taught that circumcision was necessary to be saved. The sad thing is that they really believed the bad doctrine they were espousing and they were sincere and they were committed to what they

believed. The problem was that they were WRONG in what they believed.

Paul termed what they advocated a “distortion” or “perversion” of the gospel truth. Paul gave a brief reference to the gospel truth in using the words “the grace of Christ.” This is the root of the difference in the truth that Paul proclaimed and the distortion being put forth by the Judaizers. That same distortion is prevalent today in doctrines of many groups who claim to have a way to God or a route to heaven or eternal life. The “many groups” would include those who are non-Christian and some who label themselves as Christian. The basic difference is “salvation by works” or “salvation by grace AND works” or “salvation by grace through faith and NOT of works.”

How serious did Paul think this error was? You get a good idea of it by his repeated pronouncement of a curse on anyone who would teach such error. The Greek word he used was “*anathema*” which was used to designate a thing or person that was doomed for destruction with no hope of redemption. That is very serious and somewhat sad especially when the person who holds such beliefs may do so in ignorance. Paul did not give any consideration as to whether someone teaching such error was doing so for malicious reasons or because they thought they were trying to help others.

So what do we REALLY believe about how a person is saved? How many times have you heard someone who was a professing Christian make a statement such as

“I hope God will let me into heaven.”

“I hope I do enough good to get into heaven.”

“I may not be perfect, but if that preacher down at the church makes it to heaven, then I will too.”

“I’m sure God will let me into heaven since I study the Bible and I’m basically a good person.”

Such statements show a basic misunderstanding of God’s plan of salvation. In spite of what we say, the real test is in our behavior. We will act in accordance with what we really believe regardless of what we say or what we profess to believe. Most of the time we are not even aware of the basic motives or driving force behind our decisions and actions. Do we do the right thing because we know we are supposed to? Do we do the right thing because we don’t want to get into trouble with our spouse or the authorities? Do we do the right thing because we don’t want to jeopardize our ability to get into heaven? Do we do the right things because we love the Lord and want to please him?

The Giver of the Gospel is God

The gospel message that Paul shared with the churches in the first century was given to Paul by revelation. We see Paul’s defense of the authenticity of the message in the following verses.

¹¹ For I would have you know, 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 *I received it* through a revelation of Jesus Christ. Galatians 1:11-12 (NASB95)

The Judaizers not only had a different message about God’s plan of salvation, but they also challenged Paul’s authority as an apostle. This challenge is the reason his identification of himself in verse one of this letter is somewhat different from his other letters.

Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead),

Paul came back to this point in verse 11 to try to give the readers confidence that the message he had given to them was not some idea that he had just made up. A common characteristic of man-made religions is that they emphasize the necessity for man to do something on his own and in his own strength in order to be “saved.” The gospel truth is that man can do nothing to save himself. Human pride resists this message since it downplays the ability of man. Paul’s message certainly would pass this “truth” test.

Not only did Paul **not** make up the message, he did **not** get the message from another person. We know that he heard Stephens testimony before he was stoned by the Jews in Jerusalem. He had also heard about the claims of those who followed Christ but he did not accept what they taught. Such information simply spurred him to greater persecution of the church. It was not until the “revelation” hit him as he was approaching Damascus did he even consider changing the direction of his life. There were additional and more detailed revelations during the period of time he spent in Arabia.

The point of this was to get the Galatian Christian to consider why they would abandon a divinely inspired truth for a man-made distortion of the truth.

Not only was Paul’s message divinely inspired, but Paul was divinely appointed to deliver the message to the Gentiles. Look at the following comments from the letter.

¹⁵ But when God, who had set me apart *even* from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace, was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. Galatians 1:15-17 (NASB95)

In words that remind us of what Jeremiah wrote as he described his call to be a prophet

⁴ Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, ⁵ “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, And before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Jeremiah 1:4-5 (NASB95)

Paul took no credit for his being used as a proclaimer of the gospel. God (by His grace) called Paul to do this even before he was born. It happened because it was pleasing to God; therefore, it was God’s initiative and not anything that man had started. Since it was God who was the Initiator, Paul did not see a need to check it out with any experts or officials of the church in Jerusalem.

How does this apply to us today? Is this not the same way we are saved today? We hear of the gospel message and it may be just part of the background information we have. At some point we are confronted by the Holy Spirit regarding the claims of Christ and we have to make a decision. We may get teaching from others in a church setting, but that which we truly “know” of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit comes to us by revelation in our spirits. Just as Paul spent time alone with God so that such a revelation was possible, we too need to continually spend time with God so that He can reveal more of Himself to us.

No Compromise

When we are solidly grounded in the word and are walking by faith then we are less likely to be tempted to compromise what we believe for some other ideas that might come along or if we are in the position of having to defend what we believe in the face of strong opposition. When Paul did eventually go to Jerusalem, the Judaizers were waiting for him and they were ready to make charges that all Paul was preaching was an easy believe-ism. We see an account of this visit in the following passage:

¹ Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. ² It was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but *I did so* in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain. ³ But not even Titus, who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. ⁴ But *it was* because of the false brethren secretly brought in, who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage. ⁵ But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you. ⁶ But from those who were of high reputation (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—well, those who were of reputation contributed nothing to me. Galatians 2:1-6 (NASB95)

When Paul was in Jerusalem he reported on the progress of the gospel among the Gentiles. The leaders were likely unaware of just how much had been done in spreading the gospel. This particular visit was likely associated with delivering relief to the Christians in Jerusalem who were suffering because of the famine. Paul was not summonsed to come explain what he was doing, but he went because God had directed him to go. Paul met with the leadership in Jerusalem in order to “set the record straight” as to what was happening and to counter any wrong interpretation of what he was doing by the Judaizers.

After the leaders in Jerusalem heard Paul’s account, they did not have anything to add to the message he was preaching. By relating this information Paul was again trying to give the Galatian Christians confidence in the original message they had heard from him and not go off on some tangent that involved trying to earn salvation by their own efforts.

The truth of that message has not changed. It is by grace that we are saved through faith in the completed work of Christ in dying for our sins on the Cross. It is not of any merit or actions on our part but entirely of God’s initiative. Once we have come into a saving relationship, then we will give evidence that we are saved by what we do. The good works are a result and not a cause of our salvation.