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Not man's gospel

Galatians 1:11-17

September 25, 2022

Text

¹¹ For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. ¹² For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. ¹³ For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴ And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. ¹⁵ But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, ¹⁶ was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

Prayer

Introduction

Defending the gospel in the face of tyranny.

Virginia Prodan¹ was born in Romania when Communism reigned. As a young woman, she became a Christian. A lawyer by training, Prodan went to work defending Christians who faced persecution from the government for things such as smuggling Bibles, for worshiping, and for sharing their faith with others.

Not surprisingly, Prodan herself faced persecution for this work.

Her tires were slashed. Another time, she was put under house arrest. She and her family faced threats. She had been kidnapped and beaten by Romanian police. But the worst was still to come.

At the end of a long day, Prodan returned to her office. Her legal assistant told her that there was a man who had wanted to meet with her.

When she entered her office and sat down, the man pulled out a gun and said she had failed to heed the warnings she'd been given and that he had come to finish the job.

That man said to her, "I am here to kill you."

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/october/i-found-gospel-in-communist-romania.html>

We're continuing in our series in the Book of Galatians this morning.

Book context

As a brief reminder, Paul had visited the churches in Galatia during his first missionary journey. But false teachers spreading a false gospel had quickly infiltrated those churches and were leading people astray.

Paul preached a gospel of grace while the false teachers were attempting to add works to the gospel.

And here's why it matters. These two conflicting gospels are not simply two equally valid opinions.

Rather it was a conflict between truth and falsity.

In today's passage, Paul will point to his own life and how the gospel is the message of Jesus Christ.

One last word of background. In the roadmap of Galatians, from the beginning of today's passage in chapter 1, verse 11 through chapter 2 verse 14, Paul will give four stories from his own life. This is the first of those stories and we see Paul talk about his

conversion to faith. And the reason why that matters in this confrontation of a false gospel is that Paul isn't giving his opinion but is writing as someone who had seen the risen Jesus.

Bridge

The main idea of this passage is: men didn't make the gospel, God did.

And we'll look at this passage in three sections this morning. Gospel creation, gospel revelation, and gospel salvation.

1. Gospel creation

Beginning in verse 11:

¹¹ For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel.

Man trying to create his own gospel would work about as well as man trying to decide the laws of physics.

You don't decide what they are. You just observe them.

In the same way, disbelieving in these laws doesn't make them false.

And the same is true with the gospel. Why? Because it's not man's gospel.

Isaiah 45:9 says:

**Does the clay say to him who forms it, 'What are you making?'
or 'Your work has no handles'?**

Of course not. That would be absurd.

But we try to dictate to the God who made us the conditions by which he forgives us.

And if that doesn't show the sinfulness of the human heart, I don't know what does.

State of Theology

Every two years, LifeWay Research and Ligonier Ministries conduct the State of Theology survey which surveys attitudes towards various theological

and morally based questions² from people who profess to be Christians.

Many respondents hold views which have strayed from Biblical Christianity.

In this year's survey, 60 percent of respondents agreed with the statement: religious belief is a matter of personal opinion, it is not about objective truth.

60 percent of Christians in this survey say that they don't believe that their faith is objectively true.

In the survey, 67% of respondents agreed with the statement that God accepts the worship of all other religions.

All other religions. You could believe in some pagan Norwegian god and they think that it's acceptable. You could believe in some Wiccan sorcery and that's acceptable. You could believe in scientology.

67 percent of professing Christians say that.

Then why do you even need Jesus?

² <https://thestateoftheology.com/>

Jesus said I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6).

These responses are simply a reflection of the values of our modern, post-Christian world which is cowardly, which hates to speak in absolutes.

But we're gambling the souls of those all around us on exchanging the gospel for a watered down false gospel just because we're afraid of having beliefs that might offend someone.

But the gospel is not man's gospel.

Our society treats it as though we can make it whatever we want it to be.

Now it's a great blessing that we live in a free country.

And people can have a different faith, or no faith. They can believe whatever they want to believe.

But that does not mean that as Christians, we should water down what we believe just to affirm what

everyone else believes. Especially when it comes to the truth of the gospel.

Because just because people can believe whatever they want to believe doesn't make everything everyone believes equally right. And we know this is true in lots of areas.

If you want to grow crops, there are right ways and wrong ways to do it. If I start planting corn in the middle of December, I'm not going to be successful.

We know that if you want to get full, you eat food.
We know that if you want to get rest, you get sleep.
We know that if you want to be clean, you bathe.

If you want to follow Jesus, then you need to listen to what he says.

People like to have this view that all roads lead to God.

I've heard people say that no religion is any truer than the rest.

Have you ever heard that?

Do you know what the problem with that statement is? Little bit of philosophy for you. The problem with that thinking is that the person who is saying that is actually saying that THEY know better than all of the other religions.

All religions have their non-negotiables and the person who says they can all be right is saying that they are the one who is truly enlightened and knows better. It's arrogance.

And it's also wrong.

I've heard people say that all religions are basically teaching the same thing.

Have you ever heard that?

People like that idea because it seems tolerant and inclusive. It appeals to our modern sensibilities. And it avoids the two words Americans most despise telling someone "you're wrong."

And so theologically, many have created this fantasy world where everyone can be right.

For the person who thinks that all religions are basically teaching the same thing. That person has

never studied comparative religion. Because no, not all religions are teaching the same thing.

Just to give one example: Christianity believes in a God that is all loving and perfectly good. Many of the world's religions do not believe in an all loving and all good God.

Throughout history, many people believed in pagan religions with many gods where they could be deceitful and spiteful.

Grace is a unique idea. The gospel is a message of a gracious God. And modern people try to co-opt grace and speak as if that's the belief of all other religions when it isn't.

I've said this before but religions generally operate on a moral scale of doing enough good to outweigh the bad. Christianity says that you cannot do enough good and that you're sinful and that the only way to redemption is through the one perfect man: Christ the Lord.

The gospel is not man's gospel.

And whatever does not correspond to the truth of the gospel is false.

Both in Paul's day and our day, we face many challenges to the gospel. In Paul's day, it was adding works to the gospel. In our day, there's the challenge of a society that largely wants to reject the truth of the gospel and the exclusivity of the gospel.

Men didn't make the gospel. God did.

Now a person can believe the gospel or not. But what we cannot do is change the gospel.

We come to our second point.

2. Gospel revelation

Why we believe

It's interesting to consider why we believe the gospel.

Different people might answer that question differently.

Maybe you met Jesus in a really difficult time in your life and he totally transformed your life. Maybe Jesus came into your life at a young age and you've always had this strong sense of him and the gospel.

Maybe for someone else, it was a realization of your sinfulness and your inability to make that right with God on your own.

Maybe you heard a sermon or were reading a passage in your Bible and it just clicked.

For some, we might really be drawn to the historical aspects of the gospel. That Jesus was a real person, he started a real movement of real people who claimed to have seen him risen from the dead and stuck to that belief, even in the face of oppression.

Maybe you were originally drawn to the gospel because of other Christians and how they lived. That there was a truth in them that you saw and that you wanted. That can be an incredibly powerful witness. And really, the impact that Christians and that the Church has had throughout the world and throughout history. I think that the transformative power we've seen in people's lives is one of the greatest testimonies that we have to the truth of the gospel.

And again, many more answers to that question could be given.

In verse 12, we start to see Paul's reason.

For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Paul believed in the gospel was because he had seen the risen Jesus.

Pretty good reason.

In the Bible, we see Jesus appear to Paul in Acts chapter 9.

And that is all the more striking and all the more miraculous when you know where Paul came from.

Continuing in our passage.

Verses 13 and 14:

¹³ For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴ And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own

age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.

Let's talk about Paul's life before he met Jesus.

He says he had been advancing in Judaism. In other words, he was growing in reputation. He was someone who fought this upstart Christian movement.

We see glimpses of this in the Book of Acts in both word and deed.

In Acts chapter 7, the Apostle Stephen is martyred. Paul is there. Just as a reminder, Paul tends to be referred to as Saul prior to his conversion. He went by two names.

Acts 7:58, we see the stoning of Stephen:

Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

We see Paul's oppressive ways continuing into Acts chapter 8.

Acts 8:1 says:

Saul approved of his execution.

And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

Paul was a fanatical zealot. Not unlike more modern groups like the Taliban and Isis, not unlike the Kamikaze pilots in World War II. Paul was a religious radical who sought to punish and persecute those who disagreed with him.

I'll just speak for myself. I think I lose sight of that in Paul's story. Yeah, I know it. But Paul did so much good through his ministry that I forget where he came from. He was a brutal opponent of the church.

Acts 8:3:

But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

In Acts 26, Paul is reflecting back on his life before faith where he again talks of his treatment of the church.

Acts 26:9-10:

⁹ “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them.

I won't read the whole passage, but after Paul is converted in Acts 9, the Lord calls a Christian named Ananias to go to Paul and confirm his commission.

Acts 9:10-12:

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.” ¹¹ And the Lord said to him, “Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, ¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.”

So he's told to go to Paul.

But there's a problem.

Verse 13-14:

¹³ But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.”

Paul's reputation precedes him.

But Paul is converted.

The reason he believed was because he had seen the risen Lord. Something that should always strengthen our faith is seeing how the gospel impacts others.

Paul was combatting false teachings of people who wanted to add law to the gospel but in just a few verses, he talks a little bit about his own story and in that, we see the power of the message.

That the gospel is powerful enough that it could change the heart of a man who had been totally opposed to it.

Michael's story

There's another story that I want to share about a man who had been zealous and who was advancing in his career. His name was Michael.

As a child in communist Romania, he had already started to distinguish himself as being loyal to the government as he would spy on classmates and relatives. As a young man, he became an officer in the state police.

He received various promotions and rewards for his work. Like Paul, he persecuted dissidents. This included Christians who were loyal to Christ, not to their government.

He had arrested people, he had interrogated and tortured people. He had even killed people.

In 1984, he was at the pinnacle of his government work when Romanian president Nicolae Ceausescu personally sent Michael to the office of Virginia Prodan.

For both Michael and for Paul, they were living their lives according to false gospels. In their own ways, both of them were living based on their own

achievement and merit to gain greater respect and honor.

For Paul, it was the law and his adherence that was his hope. But then Jesus stepped into his life and everything changed.

We come to our third scene.

3. Gospel salvation

Paul has talked about where he came from. Paul the persecutor.

Verses 15-17:

¹⁵ But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, ¹⁶ was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

There's a lot to unpack here. And parts of verses 16 and 17 I'll also touch on, Lord willing, in a couple weeks.

For now, I want to focus on Paul's conversion. He was as deep in sin as you can be.

It is perhaps this past life of sin that inspired Paul to write to Timothy and say:

¹⁵ The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost (1 Timothy 1:15).

Because he had been forgiven for much, he had an appreciation for the weight of his own sins.

In the passage, Paul says that he had been set apart before he was born. This points to God's initiative in Paul's salvation. That even though Paul was an opponent of Christ, the Lord knew all along that he was going to use Paul for his purposes.

Paul says that he was set apart and that he was called by God's grace.

It's amazing to think of where Paul had come from and then the total 180 that happened. There was no gradual progression of warming to the gospel. There

were no in depth conversations with the apostles or other ministers.

Paul went from being a die-hard opponent to a born again believer.

It was balck and white. It was day and night. It was in an instant.

Such a dramatic and radical reversal was the work of God. And it's all the more striking when you consider the rest of Paul's life. The struggles, beatings, imprisonments, and ultimately the death that he faced for the sake of the gospel. He went from being a persecutor of the church to being one who suffered great persecution for the church.

Verse 16 says **was pleased to reveal his Son to me**

Paul encountered the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus.

In that, we see a difference between the gospel which Paul preached and the false gospel that had infiltrated the churches in Galatia. That Paul had seen Jesus.

Who is Paul

A few weeks ago, when we started this series in Galatians, I made the point that what you think about Paul matters to how you read the New Testament.

Now what matters ultimately is faith in Jesus Christ and believing that he is the Son of God who died for your sins and who forgives you because of his grace.

But how you read Paul matters too. Because a skeptic could question if maybe Paul had dreamed it, or maybe he was lying, or maybe he thought he saw something he didn't see. Or any other excuse people can point to in order to delegitimize Paul.

His whole testimony hinges on what he saw being true. Otherwise, it's just two different sets of opinions. What Paul thinks and what these other teachers think.

But it's the belief that Paul is called to be an apostle which gives weight to what he says.

Now the fact that the other apostles affirmed Paul matters.

But what matters more is that Jesus called Paul.

I'll just speak for myself.

And I think that the entire story of Paul's life speaks to the authenticity of what he saw. That there is no explanation for why he so radically changed than that he really saw what he said he saw. And that his life was truly turned upside down when Jesus walked into it. And that a man who had hated Jesus could be a man who would die to defend the gospel.

Because that's how powerful of a message the gospel of Jesus Christ is.

That the most hardened person who is full of hate can become someone who is full of love.

And that should give us all hope. In Paul, we see a picture of the depths of sin that Jesus can forgive. That there is no sin too great and no sinner too far away to be redeemed.

We know people in our own lives. I'm not saying they're just like Paul but they might have a heart that is adamant in its opposition to the good news of the gospel. Never give up on a person. Never stop

praying, never stop believing, never stop sharing,
never stop loving.

Earlier in our time, I mentioned that we all have a
reason why we believe in the gospel.

One of the most striking will always be seeing how
it's impacted the life of another. We see that in Paul.
The gospel changes lives.

The law does not. It might change some behaviors.
It might compel someone to behave.

But the law does not produce joy, or hope. Trying to
earn God does not produce peace. It produces the
opposite because you're always trying to earn it. The
gospel brings peace. The gospel brings life.

A manmade gospel cannot produce those things.
But man did not make the gospel. God does. And
God's gospel changes lives.

Why do you believe the gospel?

I believe it because it's true. Because we have a
gracious God who in his goodness, saved me.

Conclusion

Virginia Prodan looked at Michael.

His eyes had a cold, lifeless look in them.

She had always known that her work was dangerous and that it could one day cost her her life.

She prayed silently in that moment.

She spoke to the man. Writing in Christianity Today, Prodan says:

“Have you ever asked yourself: ‘Why do I exist?’ or ‘Why am I here?’ or ‘What is the meaning of my life?’ I once asked myself those questions.”

He slid his gun back into the holster. I leaned forward. “You are here because God put you here, and he has put you to a test. Will you abide in God or in the will of a man—your boss, President Ceausescu, who requires you to worship him? God has given you free will to choose.”

His eyes softened. My heart thumped even faster, and my confidence rose.

“The truth is that we have all been corrupted and gone away from God.” He nodded. “We all are sinners, and our sin has determined our future. Hebrews 9:27 says, ‘People are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.’ ”

His mouth fell slightly open, and his hands relaxed.

“But the good news is that God has prepared a way out for every one of us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross: ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.’ ”

Finally, he brought his hand to his forehead and said, “You are right. The people who sent me here are crazy. I do need Christ.” He promised, “I will come to your church as a secret brother in Christ. I will worship your powerful God.”

And then he left.

Everyone has a gospel they believe in.

Do you believe in the gospel of the Bible? That is the only message that is true, that leads to Christ and which points

to eternal life. That we are sinners but that there is salvation which is found in Jesus.

What's the gospel that you're believing?

Michael's life changed that day in 1984. His life was touched by the gospel. Like Paul, he did a 180. He had come to bring death but instead found life. He let Prodan live that day. She would go on to flee the country. Today, she lives in America.

Michael drove home. Now it was he who was in a precarious situation. He hadn't done the job he was sent to do. But as he drove and considered God's love, tears filled his eyes and the most amazing thing happened.

He got into a car accident!

When he was taken to the hospital, his boss assumed that he got into the accident on the way to the office, not from the office.

After communism fell in Romania, that man went onto seminary and became a pastor.

Man made gospels do not transform the human soul. But the gospel of Jesus Christ does.