

0303

The apostles and the spies

Galatians 2:1-10

October 16, 2022

### Text

**Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. <sup>2</sup>I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. <sup>3</sup>But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. <sup>4</sup>Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery— <sup>5</sup>to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. <sup>6</sup>And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. <sup>7</sup>On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised <sup>8</sup>(for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), <sup>9</sup>and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. <sup>10</sup>Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.**

### Prayer

#### Introduction - tradition

The holiday season is rapidly approaching.

And one of the reasons why it's a time of year that's so beloved is that it's a time that is rich with traditions.

Think for just a moment of a favorite holiday tradition in your family. And the older you are, maybe the further back you can go on certain traditions that have been part of your Thanksgiving or your Christmas for many years.

And imagine if everyone in your family just decided to stop with a beloved tradition.

Maybe some of you have experienced that before.

We hate that.

If I invited you to my house for Thanksgiving dinner this year, and we were serving frozen pizza and ice cream sandwiches and then turned on the TV and watched a marathon of my favorite World War II movies, it just wouldn't feel like Thanksgiving.

And that's not just limited to the holidays.

Traditions in school. Prom and graduation. Getting a yearbook or a letter jacket. Rites of passage like learning how to drive.

Traditions in sports.

A baseball game doesn't feel like a baseball game without the national anthem, ceremonial first pitch and the seventh inning stretch. For the Cubs when they win, they fly the W flag.

In the NFL, the Steelers have the terrible towels, the Packers have the Lambeau leap, and the Bears have...a new quarterback every year.

I think of 2020. There were obviously many things with that year that were difficult. But one of the many unfortunate things was traditions being interrupted, coming to an end, needing to be changed.

The buzz phrase that year was "the new normal."

But when you care about traditions, you don't want a new normal. You want the traditional tradition.

Because traditions matter.

And they might matter more to some of us than others, but in various ways, they matter to all of us.

Traditions connect us with people. They can have positive associations with fond memories. They connect us with past generations.

#### A history of circumcision

For the Jewish people, both today and in the past, a tradition that they view as sacred is circumcision.

It had been given by God to Abraham as a sign of the covenant. It became a requirement of being part of the Israelite community. It was theologically and culturally important.

In the centuries before Jesus walked the earth, both the Israelites and their enemies had made circumcision into a political issue and a sign of oppression.

When the Greeks conquered Jerusalem, they forbade the practice and made circumcision punishable by death for both the mother who allowed it and the child who received it<sup>1</sup>.

A couple generations later, the Jewish people had more autonomy in the land and their kings attempted to force the practice upon all males living within Israel.

Some Jewish theologians believed that the arrival of the Messiah was linked to the purification of Israel and to all of the men being circumcised within the land<sup>2</sup>.

This wasn't an insignificant issue. There was history behind it. It's not so easy to let go of something where there are generations of tradition and practice and which have become part of a cultural identity.

In Jewish circles, the importance of the practice wasn't even a debate.

It's interesting to consider the ministry of Jesus. Circumcision rarely comes up in the gospels, although Luke's gospel records the infant Jesus being circumcised.

People have all sorts of reactions to Jesus during his ministry. There are people who disliked things Jesus did, things he said, people with whom he associated. There were controversies involving Jesus' activities on the Sabbath and statements he made about the temple.

But there wasn't a circumcision controversy.

However in the early church, with the earliest Christians who had been Jewish and with people still trying to figure out the relationship of the gospel to Judaism, of the new covenant to the old covenant, of grace to the law, there were those who thought that the practice of circumcision would obviously carry over into the Church.

Paul addresses these circumcision controversies in numerous writings besides Galatians. He also talks about the matter in Romans, 1 Corinthians, Philippians, and Colossians<sup>3</sup>.

In the debate, there were those who argued that circumcision was necessary to be part of the Christian community. For this side, they accepted Jesus but still thought that there were aspects of the Old Testament law which Christians needed to follow.

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy George, [Galatians](#), vol. 30, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 143.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy George, [Galatians](#), vol. 30, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 142.

And you had those who did not think circumcision was a requirement for Christians.

This debate was essentially settled in the first century and is not especially controversial within the church today.

But this passage is still relevant. Because it's a passage which deals with a subject far more profound than circumcision. It's a passage which gets to the heart of the gospel itself, and those who seek to dilute the truth of the gospel by adding requirements to the gospel.

### Bridge

The main idea of our passage today is that a gospel with law is no gospel at all.

And we'll be looking at this passage in three sections.

A circumcision controversy, a gospel under attack, and an agreement among the apostles.

With that, we'll jump right into our passage this morning.

#### 1. A circumcision controversy

For a little bit of background context on this situation, it's important to remember that Paul had previously traveled to the churches in Galatia and shared the gospel. After that, those churches had been infiltrated by those who had sought to add requirements onto the gospel and who had led many Christians astray and caused confusion in the church.

And so in writing to the Galatians, Paul is talking about how this controversy was previously dealt with in Jerusalem.

Last week, we finished up Galatians chapter 1.

At the end of chapter 1, Paul had been talking about his conversion to Christianity and he had also given a broad overview of some of his early happenings when he came to faith. He had been saved through a revelation of Jesus and called to preach the gospel to the gentiles (people who were not Jewish).

He talks about his early travels. He had gone to Arabia and Damascus, he had gone to Jerusalem, Syria, and Cilicia.

Chapter 2 hits the ground running:

**Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me.**

So you have Paul writing to the Galatians and talking about this controversy in Jerusalem, because the Galatian churches are facing the same issue where people were attempting to add requirements to the gospel.

In the passage, Paul mentions that Titus and Barnabas had accompanied him. They'll both be mentioned again in this passage. Titus in particular is very important, because he was somewhat of a test case in this whole debate.

When big Supreme Court decisions get made, they talk about landmark cases. Ones which help set precedent.

Titus was Paul's landmark case against requiring circumcision. He was a non-circumcised, non-Jewish convert to Christianity.

Verse 2:

**<sup>2</sup> I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain.**

So what Paul's saying is that he met with the apostles and told them the gospel message he had been sharing with people who were not Jewish.

Paul didn't meet with all of the apostles. But this passage will later mention that he met with the apostles who were the primary leaders in the church: Peter, James, and John.

Now throughout chapter 1, Paul had talked about his apostolic authority. He's not presenting his gospel to the rest of the apostles for their approval. Paul is not shy about the fact that he is their apostolic equal.

But it's still worth being in agreement. That's a good thing. And when you have Paul preaching a gospel of grace and you have other people trying to add law to the gospel, Paul had worked to show that the apostles were in agreement.

Verse 3:

**<sup>3</sup> But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek.**

Greek is synonymous with gentile here. He's Greek which is emphasizing the fact that Titus was not Jewish.

After Paul had met with the apostles, even though Titus was with him, they didn't compel him to get circumcised. And so the reason why Titus matters is that if he had come to faith in the gospel and if he could believe in the gospel, and know salvation through Christ without circumcision, then so could anyone else.

And that is the gospel. What makes us acceptable by God is what Christ has done.

We come to our second point.

## 2. The gospel under attack

So we see preliminary agreement between Paul and the other prominent apostles in Jerusalem. And Paul will return to that overarching discussion again at the end of the passage.

But he interrupts that to talk about those who had sought to impose circumcision.

Verse 4:

**<sup>4</sup> Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—**

Paul does not mince words. His language is heavy.

He calls them false brothers. In other words, he's saying that they're not really part of the brotherhood of the church. The reason is because they are preaching a false gospel.

That language, that thinking doesn't sit well in our postmodern, live and let live, speak your truth, all roads lead to God, coexist bumper sticker, culture.

But this isn't some small disagreement. They're disagreeing over the fundamentals of what it means to be made right with God. And to reduce salvation to our own merit is to rob Christ of his glory and the cross of its meaning.

Paul talks about them spying out the freedom which is in Christ and bringing people into slavery. It was a threat from within the church.

Attaching law to the gospel enslaves. I'll have more on that subject in a few moments.

Verse 5, Paul says that they did not back down on the issue:

**<sup>5</sup> to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.**

Paul is a man of conviction.

It matters that Paul didn't yield to the false teaching because then he would have been preaching a false gospel.

Paul isn't concerned about this for his sake. It's for the sake of others. It's for the church. It's for us.

The apostles who had seen the risen Jesus wrote down what they had seen and went to their deaths for that truth.

And so Paul did not back down because he sought to preserve the gospel for you.

### False gospels

Because that is our tradition. That is THE tradition. The gospel. The truth of the message that we have a savior who died and rose. That we were dead in sin, but Jesus brings eternal life. That we were condemned in our sins, but Jesus gives mercy.

Paul would not give in.

There is no negotiating with a false gospel.

### Winston Churchill

For those who had sought to impose circumcision. The view had gained traction in the early church. In Acts 15, you have the Jerusalem Council which convened to address the question of what was required for gentiles to join the church.

There's debate about when Galatians was written. Because Paul does not reference the Jerusalem council, I believe Galatians was written prior to that council.

That's recorded in Acts 15, shortly after Paul had originally visited the Galatian churches.

In Acts 15:1, you see the issue come up where people are trying to make a gospel issue of circumcision.

**But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."**

There could be no agreement with this side.

One of my favorite movies in recent years is the film Darkest Hour. It's about Winston Churchill and when he became the Prime Minister of England in 1940. They were tough times. On the same day he became prime minister, the Germans invaded France.

At the time, there was a lot of pressure on Churchill to come to the table and negotiate with Germany. One of the most dramatic scenes in the movie involves some of advisors and generals meeting with Churchill and trying to convince him that a war against Germany is unwinnable for the allies.

Churchill, portrayed in the movie by Gary Oldman slams his hands on the table and says "You cannot reason with a tiger when your head is in its mouth."

And you could not compromise on the gospel with people who cared more about tradition than the cross.

Because a gospel with law is no gospel at all.

We come to our third point. The fellowship of the apostles.

### 3. The fellowship of the apostles

Paul returns to his discussion from verse 2 about how he had met with some of the other leaders of the apostles.

Verse 6:

**<sup>6</sup>And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me.**

Paul once again almost downplaying the apostles.

**Those who seemed influential.**

Now he'll later refer to them as pillars of faith so he does respect them, but he also doesn't venerate the rest of the apostles.

Paul says that they **added nothing to me**.

His point is that they added nothing to the gospel that he had preached.

There was apostolic authority in recognizing the truth of the gospel of grace. People who had seen the risen Jesus and who had been entrusted by Jesus to lead his church were in agreement on the gospel.

Verses 7-8:

**On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the**



**circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles),**

Paul's focus is on mission.

Paul said something similar in chapter 1. He was called to preach the gospel to the uncircumcised. In other words, he was called to preach the gospel primarily to those who were not ethnic Jews. The other apostles recognized that.

That was Paul's call.

Peter's was the opposite. He primarily preached the gospel to the Jewish people. Both ministries mattered. Both groups are part of the mission of God whom the Lord had intended to reach with the gospel message.

But what matters is that they were both preaching the same message. There isn't a Jewish gospel and a gentile gospel.

Verse 9-10:

**<sup>9</sup> and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. <sup>10</sup> Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.**

Paul is again emphasizing the fellowship he had with the other apostles.

They both affirmed his gospel and his ministry.

Paul had ultimately wanted to go to serve people and was caught up in this controversy.

But theology matters.

### The law

I've said it before but bad theology is often close enough to good theology to seem right. For those who were trying to force circumcision, they weren't overtly denying or rejecting Jesus.

But they were saying "Jesus..and."

Jesus and circumcision.

And really, not just that, but it became Jesus and circumcision and the law of the Old Testament.

I borrow an idea from Tim Keller. You have all of these laws in the Old Testament.

Some of them are things that might seem antiquated to us today. Dietary laws, cleanliness laws.

But they all had principles behind them which were valid.

For instance, you have all of these sacrificial laws in the Old Testament. They're foreign to our culture and how we think.

But those aren't arbitrary. They point to our need for atonement. That we're sinful and that something outside of ourselves is needed for our redemption.

Even after you had followed all of the laws in the Old Testament, sacrifice was still required.

And that points to Jesus, the ultimate sacrifice.

Do we still need sacrifices today? No.

Why?

They were good in the old covenant but they're not needed now. Why?

Because the sacrifice is fulfilled in Christ. The atonement that we could not earn on our own was achieved by Jesus.

And so when we take what Christ has done, what he has fulfilled, what he has accomplished, and feel that we still need to impose requirements overtop of that for our acceptability before God, it is saying Jesus is not enough. It's saying his death on the cross for your sins wasn't truly sufficient.

And in that, you lose the gospel. Because a gospel with law is no gospel at all.

And that is what Paul is saying when he talks about bringing slavery. It is imposing requirements which will not save you and practices which will not bring you closer to Christ.

The dietary laws are fulfilled in Christ, the sacrifices are fulfilled in Christ, and circumcision is fulfilled in Christ.

How is circumcision fulfilled by Jesus?

Abraham

To answer that, we must remember when the Lord instituted circumcision with Abraham.

Michael Heiser is helpful on this point<sup>4</sup>.

Abraham and his wife Sarah were both very old. She was well beyond child bearing age. But the Lord had made a covenant with Abraham where he had promised to bring blessing to the world through the offspring of Abraham. The only way this could happen was by a miracle. Because they had never had a child.

But the Lord promised that Sarah would have a child. Isaac.

In Genesis 17, as a sign of the covenant, God commanded Abraham and all of the men in his household to be circumcised.

Heiser argues that the key to understanding the purpose of circumcision as a covenant sign is directly tied to the birth of Isaac.

For everyone in the household of Abraham, they knew that circumcision was connected to God's promise. And yeah, it might have seemed crazy.

But after that is when Sarah became pregnant.

As circumcision has unmistakable symbolisms with procreation, it was a reminder that Israel's entire existence as God's people came about through a miraculous intervention of the Lord.

As Israel's continued existence could only come through the providence of God, circumcision was a continual sign to Israel of the Lord who made and sustained them.

But the promised offspring of Abraham would also point forward to the ultimate promised son, Christ the Lord who would himself come from the line of Abraham and he would be the one who would bring the ultimate blessing to the nations.

We see in Jesus the ultimate fulfillment of the practice. Should Christians still do circumcision to remember that we too exist only by virtue of the providence of God?

It's allowable but not required. Instead, Jesus has given to the church baptism and communion as signs of the new covenant and things which point to the gospel.

But those things still don't save you.

In communion, the cup and the bread point to Christ's body and blood.

In baptism, it is a symbolic death and resurrection with Jesus.

But there is no call to continue practicing circumcision.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.biblestudymagazine.com/bible-study-magazine-blog/2017/1/12/why-circumcision>

That's not the only reason why circumcision is no longer required. There are further parallels to sacrifice that we don't have time to cover this morning.

The issue comes up a few more times in Galatians.

### Conclusion

I want to close by talking about this final verse.

**they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.**

In some ways, that almost seems unrelated to the rest of the passage.

Everything Paul has been saying talks about this circumcision controversy and how the apostles responded. Then in the end, he talks about how he was eager to remember the poor.

Theology matters.

It's important to love and serve people. But if you are not on guard for the gospel, you will get off course.

Paul needed to get the truth of the gospel right first. Because without that, you're not ultimately sharing a message with people that brings salvation. You might meet a temporary need, but if you're doing it while preaching or accepting a false gospel, you're meeting a temporary need while overlooking the eternal need for salvation which is found in Christ alone.

Because getting the gospel wrong will lead you off course.

1 degree on a compass might not seem like very much distance, but if you travel around the equator 1 degree off, you'll end up 500 miles away from your intended destination.

Theology matters.

When we act like it doesn't, people and churches develop all sorts of far out ideas based on preferences, feelings, and opinions but not rooted in the truth of God.

I think of how off the rails so many churches have become. And I think of how much of this is due to churches compromising on the gospel. Mitigating the saving work of Jesus and reducing him to a moral teacher. Undermining the reality of sin and wanting to focus more on self-help message.

### Gospel

I've mentioned numerous times that this entire passage might seem antiquated and irrelevant.

To some, it might seem silly or archaic.  
It isn't.

It's a landmark case for the early church that helped to sharpen what exactly the gospel and grace really are.

We are sinful people and Jesus freely offers grace because he is the righteous savior of the world who died and rose. When we believe in him, we are justified before God based on what Christ has done.

And you have churches who attack that message on every front.

## False gospels

You have churches who undermine the justifying work of Christ and instead preach a moralistic gospel that your salvation is ultimately about works. Maybe it's moral actions maybe it's being a good person. Some churches teach that things like baptism are required for salvation, and even if you don't actually have faith in Jesus, you're saved because you were baptized.

Baptism is important. But it does not and cannot save you.

The New Testament over and over again points us to how our own works, our own goodness cannot save us. If they could, we wouldn't have needed Jesus!

We are justified by faith. But then you have churches who preach a false gospel which removes the necessity for faith in Jesus. This is what progressive churches tend to do. It doesn't really even matter if you actually believe in Jesus because he forgives you anyway.

Why? Because we don't want to offend. We don't like to preach an exclusive gospel. We don't want to tell people they're wrong.

And so everything gets affirmed.

We get off track.

Paul had wanted to serve people and got caught up in a theological controversy. Because to not deal with that issue first would have ultimately been a failure to serve people with the thing that mattered most.

## Love

I've made the observation before that our society has co-opted the idea of love. When people say "love," they really mean tolerance.

And they weaponize that against Christians. We're supposed to love which means that we shouldn't oppose things. And that leads to all sorts of compromises.

In this passage, it's a reminder that there is nothing that should trump the truth of the gospel. Not serving, not being agreeable, not pressure. That the gospel is the most important truth.

And I think of all of the false gospels in our world today. That is all the more reason why churches who preach the gospel must continue to do so in an unapologetic and uncompromising way for the next generation. And for people all around us who need to know the great love that Jesus has and the great salvation that he offers.