Galatians Lesson 1 (2024)

**PAUL’S FIERCE BATTLE FOR CHRISTIAN FREEDOM**

Galatians 1:1-2:10

Key Verse: 1:10

“Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.”

The Epistle of Galatians, commonly known as Galatians, is a letter written by Apostle Paul to the early Christian communities in Galatia, the southern region of contemporary Turkey, including places like Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, and Antioch (Map#1). As one of the earliest books in the New Testament, scholars believe this letter was written approximately in AD 48, following Paul’s first missionary journey in AD 46-48. (It was probably fifteen years after his conversion and eighteen years after Jesus’ resurrection.)

This epistle is quite challenging because it exposes the most popular substitute for spiritual living among Christians throughout generations, even today. Do you know what that is? It’s legalism. What is legalism? *Legalism is trying to win God’s favor through our efforts of dedication and obedience.* Legalism can be misleading. Without realizing it, we frequently strive to meet God’s and others’ expectations of how Christians should be to win God’s approval. This effort takes various forms, such as dedicated Christian service, academic study, and volunteer work. While it may seem religious and spiritual, the outcome frequently includes frustration, bitterness, or resentment due to the inability to meet those self-imposed standards. Some Christians try to gain God’s approval through perfectionistic duty. Overcoming legalism is a key challenge in our journey to spiritual maturity.

In Paul’s time, numerous Jewish Christians acknowledged Jesus as their Savior and Lord. Yet, they also believed that strict adherence to Jewish law was necessary for the Gentile Christians to gain God’s approval. This kind of mindset of Jewish legalism infiltrated the Christian community in Galatia. In response, Paul wrote this letter, asserting that salvation is given by God’s grace through faith in Christ, not adhering to Jewish law. In his letter, Paul vigorously defended the idea of justification by faith and highlighted freedom through Christ. Throughout the book of Galatians, Paul also brought attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers, encouraging them to live by the Spirit instead of yielding to the desires of the flesh.

Overall, the Epistle of Galatians is a vibrant book applicable to all Christians, regardless of age. It directs new converts onto the correct path and facilitates the ongoing transformation of believers into new creations. We studied Galatians in 2010, and even after 14 years, I still find it a thought-provoking and enriching book, perfect for further exploration. I anticipate that this journey will be both exciting and rewarding. Are you ready for the adventure? So, let’s embark on it together and discover the treasures within the gospel.

Paul greets the Galatian Christians in verses 1-5. Look at verses 1-5. “Paul, an apostle – sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead – and all the brothers and sisters with me, to the churches in Galatia: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.” In his greeting, Paul strongly emphasizes that his commission as an apostle was not of human origin but came directly from Jesus Christ and God the Father. He also highlights the central purpose of Christ’s sacrifice, stating that Jesus gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of God the Father. Paul consistently preached a straightforward and unchanging gospel throughout his ministry: ***Christ’s death for our sins and his resurrection, as outlined in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.***

Paul pioneered the Galatia region during his first missionary journey, and several church communities were established, overcoming Jewish opposition. However, a significant challenge arose shortly after Paul returned to his home church in Antioch, Syria. Some Jewish Christians infiltrated these newly formed churches with a message contradicting Paul’s teaching. While acknowledging Jesus as the Savior for all, they contended that Paul overlooked a crucial aspect of the gospel, insisting that salvation for Gentile believers required both circumcision and faith in Jesus, dismissing faith alone as insufficient. Additionally, they questioned Paul’s apostolic authority by emphasizing that he was not one of the original Twelve disciples of Jesus. Their arguments proved compelling, confusing the believers in Galatia.

How did Paul react? He was not passive. Instead, he was determined to fight. In verses 6-10, Apostle Paul expresses his astonishment and profound concern regarding the Galatian Christians.

Look at verses 6-8. “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God’s curse!” Paul felt deeply troubled because the Galatian Christians went off track from the real gospel and embraced a messed-up and harmful version, which he thought was a big problem. The tricky part was that these infiltrators also believed in Jesus as the Savior, making them think that following Jewish laws and getting circumcised was not a big deal. Some thought it was even better and more spiritual. However, Paul strongly disagreed, asserting that such beliefs did not align with the true gospel.

Paul strongly criticized those spreading a false gospel, using forceful language, such as “Let them be under God’s curse!” (8-9), not just once, but twice. He insisted that anyone, even himself, who preaches a different gospel should face divine punishment. While this might appear intolerant and exclusive, it’s important to acknowledge that Paul was not a close-minded preacher. On the contrary, we demonstrate humility and adaptability, striving to bring people from diverse backgrounds to Christ and overcoming racial and cultural barriers, as mentioned in 1 Corinthians 9:20-22. Paul’s approach to ministry involved adjusting to the cultural context in various places. Nevertheless, he maintained that no other gospel existed apart from the one he received from Christ: salvation by God’s grace through faith alone.

Let’s read verse 10. “Am I now trying to win the approval of men or God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.” In this specific verse, Paul talks about why he speaks so strongly. He’s saying he’s not trying to make people like him; instead, he’s focused on pleasing God. His goal was to be a true servant of Christ. Paul was committed to staying true to what Jesus taught, not just going along with everyone else's thoughts. So, he was not just going along with what was popular; he was standing up firmly for the truth of the gospel. In short, he wasn’t merely a passive conformist but an unyielding fighter for the truth of the gospel.

Look at verses 11-12. “I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not human origin. I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.” In these verses, Paul firmly says that the message he shared didn’t come from people; it was directly revealed to him by Jesus Christ.

Moving to verses 13-24, Paul provides many details about where his message came from in three main parts.

First, he talks about his life before he became a follower of Jesus in verses 13-14. Look at verses 13-14. “For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.” As stated in these verses, Paul highlighted his unwavering commitment to Judaism and his intense persecution of the early Christian community.

Moving on to verses 15-17, he describes his conversion experience. Look at verses 15-17. “But when God, who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. I did not go to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later, I returned to Damascus.” In these verses, Paul defended his apostleship by emphasizing that God, through grace***, set him apart from birth to reveal his Son within him.***

What does it mean when we say that God set Paul apart to reveal himself? It means that from the time Paul was born, God had a special plan for him to share the gospel of Christ. This included developing a deep understanding of the gospel, spreading its message, and defending it (Ro. 1:1). Out of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament, Paul wrote thirteen of them: Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 &2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. **(Pic#2)**

When we read Paul’s letter to the Romans, we are amazed at how deeply he understood the gospel of Jesus Christ. How did Paul get this understanding? Unlike many of us who learn about the gospel through the stories of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Paul did not have access to these writings during his lifetime. Why? Because they were written after he passed away. Paul claimed he gained knowledge of the gospel through a dire t revelation from Christ Jesus.

To support this, Paul explained that he didn’t seek confirmation or guidance from the apostles in Jerusalem. Instead, he went to Arabia, likely spending three years alone in the wilderness ***(Pic#3 &4).*** During this time, it’s likely that Paul focused on intense study of the Scripture, deepening his understanding of the gospel through direct revelation from God.

Thirdly, Paul talks about his short trip to Jerusalem in verses 18-24. Look at verses 18-24. “Then, after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. I saw none of the other apostles – only James, the Lord’s brother. I assure you before God that what I am writing is no lie. Then I went to Syria and Cilicia. I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only heard the report: ‘The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.’ And they praised God because of me.” In this story, Paul explained his brief visit three years after his return to Damascus. Even though he spent 15 days with Cephas (Peter), he didn’t interact much with other apostles who weren’t in Jerusalem then. Consequently, meaningful contact between Paul and other apostles didn’t occur, supporting the notion that Paul didn’t learn the gospel from the apostles but came directly from Jesus Christ.

Now we know the gospel Paul preached came directly from Jesus Christ, an important question arises: *“Is Paul’s gospel distinct from the one preached by Peter and the other apostles?”* If it is, that would be a significant problem. Therefore, Paul needed to show that his gospel was in harmony with theirs.

In 2:1-10, Paul recounts another visit to Jerusalem after his first missionary journey. In verses 1-2, Paul outlines the purpose of this visit. Look at 2:1-2. “Then, after fourteen years, I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along, also. I went in response to a revelation and, meeting provably with those esteemed as leaders; I presented to them the gospel I preach among the Gentiles. I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my face in vain.” During this meeting in Jerusalem, Paul emphasized the critical points of his message, emphasizing God's grace and faith in Jesus Christ. This was to make sure there was unity in the essential parts of the gospel between him and the apostles, who were like the leaders of the Christian Church. For this visit, Paul intentionally brought Titus, a Gentile Christian who was not circumcised. Titus was a crucial test case during the Jerusalem council.

Look at verses 3-5. “Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. This matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.” In verses 3-5, Paul points out that despite Titus being Greek, he wasn’t forced to get circumcised. This incident showed that the other apostles accepted Paul’s message, confirming salvation through faith without relying on the law. Judaizers, who were against the gospel, tried to limit Christian freedom by imposing legalistic practices. However, the apostles, including Paul, didn’t give in to the pressure and threats.

Look at verses 6-10. “As for those who were held in high esteem – whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not show favoritism – they added nothing to my message. On the contrary, they recognized that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised. For God, who was at work in Peter as an apostle to the circumcised, was also at work in me as an apostle to the Gentiles. James, Cephas and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along.” In these verses, Paul highlights that the important leaders in Jerusalem –Peter, James, and John – acknowledged Paul’s authority as an apostle among the non-Jewish people (Gentiles). This acceptance was a big win for Paul and the whole Christian community. This event showed how the apostles united to spread the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

To sum it up, reflecting on the beginning of this letter brings forth several lessons. However, the standout lesson is Paul’s brave defense of Christian freedom against Judaizers. This wasn’t a quick and easy fight; it took years of keeping legalism from infiltrating the Christian community. Paul’s strong commitment to the true gospel centered on salvation through faith in Jesus Christ sets a compelling example. The freedom we have wasn’t free – it came at the cost of Jesus’ sacrificial death and the shedding of his blood. **Paul stands out as a defender of the gospel truth and a fighter for freedom.**

It’s vital to understand that genuine favor with God doesn’t come from hard work but from faith in the redemptive work of Christ Jesus, who offered himself on the cross and sent the Holy Spirit to guide us. Paul’s courage reminds us that living by faith requires courage to uphold the gospel truth and actively pursue freedom in Christ. ***Truth and freedom go hand in hand***.

This reminds us of Jesus’ words to his disciples: “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31- 32). Both Jesus and Paul instruct us to hold onto the truth in Jesus’ teachings and experience the liberating power it brings. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, instead of passively conforming and going along with the crowd, let’s actively stand as freedom fighters in Christ Jesus.