

“The Only Good News” (Galatians 1:1-9)

June 14, 2015

Brian Watson

Galatians 1:1–9 (ESV)

¹ *Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—² and all the brothers who are with me,*

To the churches of Galatia:

³ *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,⁴ who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,⁵ to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.*

⁶ *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷ not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble 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 the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.⁹ As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.¹*

It seems like there are universal desires that humans have. We want our lives to count. We want our lives to have meaning. We all want happiness. And we all have a question that’s kicking around in the back of your minds: How can we have a good life? In other words, how can we flourish and thrive? We may think about this in different ways. Generally, there have been two ways to think about having a good life. One way of trying to achieve the good life is through obedience and duty. It comes through following the rules and being disciplined. That has traditionally been the way that many people have tried to live a life of meaning.

Another way of trying to have a good life, one that is more common in America today, is through breaking all the rules, or simply denying there are any rules. We try to find our true selves by rejecting what others want us to be, or by rejecting what others want us to do. Instead, we follow our heart, our desires. This is a search for “authenticity.” Some call this a project of self-realization or self-actualization.² It’s a coming out of sorts: “This is the real me, like it or not.”

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001, 2007, 2011).

² “Self-actualization” comes from Abraham Harold Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs.” The current quest for the true and authentic self probably differs to some degree from what Maslow had in mind.

We could call the first path legalism, or moralism. “Follow the rules. Be good.” Often, this attitude is found in religions. But it’s not just in traditional religions like Judaism and Islam. We also find this kind of attitude in various forms of spirituality. If only you do this and do that, you can become enlightened, or reach Nirvana, or whatever the goal is.

The second path we can call libertinism, or licentiousness, or—better yet—self-ism, or me-ism. Break the rules. Remove the shackles. Do whatever makes you feel good.

Christianity, however, says something very different. It says that following the rules doesn’t make you acceptable to God, because his standards are so high. And laws can’t fix our greatest problem, which is our disordered desires: our hearts don’t want the right things. And that’s the problem with the second path: following our hearts, or our desires, gets us into trouble. Because our desires are messed up, they don’t lead us to what’s truly good for us.

To learn more about Christianity, and to see how its message is relevant for us today, we’re going to look carefully at a letter that was written almost two thousand years ago to a group of people almost halfway around the world. Now, why would we do that? How can we find meaning and direction from an old letter written by a man who knew nothing of modern medicine and technology? Christians believe that the Bible is not only an old book written by people who lived long ago. We also believe it is ultimately God’s written Word. That is, we believe God directed certain people to write exactly what he wanted written. So, when we look at an old letter written by a man named Paul, we’re actually hearing from God himself.

We also believe that the Bible remains relevant because it speaks about God, who is eternal and unchanging. So whatever the Bible says about God isn’t subject to change. Furthermore, we also believe that human nature remains fundamentally the same throughout all generations. The surface issues may look different, but who we are, what we desire, and what we do remain basically the same. So, we now have the Internet and smart phones, but these things help us do what we’ve always done: communicate, buy and sell things, be entertained and distracted, look up information, and navigate their way through life. Humans have always desired, loved, married, had children, celebrated, fought, died, and mourned, among other things.

In one book of Old Testament, Ecclesiastes, we read these words (Eccl. 1:9):

What has been is what will be,
and what has been done is what will be done,
and there is nothing new under the sun.

Before I continue, I want to insert a footnote here. I realize that many people think that they can't learn anything from the Bible. It's old. It's ancient. Therefore, it's outdated. It's a product of a backwards culture. Yet I think those assumptions should be challenged. People assume that new is better. But there's a problem with that thought. Technological progress doesn't guarantee moral progress. In other words, just because we have better technology and medicine doesn't mean we're better people. With modern technology comes good and bad. We have modern medicine, which is an amazing thing. But we also have weapons of mass destruction. We have modern transportation, but now we can kill people by flying planes into buildings or driving drunk or texting while driving. We have the Internet, but we also have identity theft, cyber warfare, Internet porn, and a whole host of trivial distractions.

We have made some moral progress, but with each moral victory, such as the elimination of slavery, we have moral regress in other areas, like the destruction of the nuclear, biological family, or various addictions. The assumption that we're progressing doesn't hold up to a serious study of history.

Before we assume that the Bible is irrelevant and culturally conditioned, we should consider another possibility: what if our ideas are irrelevant and culturally conditioned? While I was studying this week, I came across this claim by a theologian named Timothy George: "the true purpose of biblical scholarship is not to show how 'relevant' the Bible is to the modern world, but rather how irrelevant the modern world—and we ourselves as persons enmeshed in it—have become in our self-centered preoccupations and sinful rebellion against the God who spoke and still speaks through his chosen prophets and apostles."³ What we think is important now will probably be mocked by future generations, just as we have looked back at earlier generations and laughed at their clothes or their music or their ideas. We should be careful before assuming that we know it all, or that we know best.

So, with that in mind, let's now turn to the book of Galatians. This is a letter written by a man named Paul, who was an apostle of Jesus Christ. When we're reading one of the letters in the New Testament, we have to keep in mind that the author wasn't writing some abstract theological treatise. No, he was writing for a purpose. He wanted a particular group of people to know something important. And God wants us to know this message, too.

³ Timothy George, *Galatians*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 11–12.

In order to understand a letter, we have to do what's called mirror reading. It's like hearing one end of a telephone conversation. We have to figure out, from the context, what the main issue is. As we'll see, the main issue is that some false teachers have come to a group of Christians. They have been teaching this group of Christians a message that is contrary to the message of Christianity. And Paul wants to correct them.

In the first two verses, Paul identifies himself and his audience. He writes:

¹ Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— ² and all the brothers who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

As I said, Paul was an apostle. An apostle simply means someone who was sent by another. In this case, Paul says he was sent not from men and through any particular person, but through Jesus and God the Father. Paul was a capital-A Apostle, one of a select group of men who saw Jesus after he had risen from the dead. And he was commissioned to be a messenger, to spread the good news of Christianity around the world.

We'll learn a bit more about Paul as we study this letter, but you should know that Paul had once been a Jewish religious leader in Jerusalem. He was a Pharisee, a group of conservative Jews. When we first meet Paul in the book of Acts, he is trying to persecute the first group of Christians. He thought that they were wrong because they believed that a man named Jesus was the Son of God, and that he was the Messiah—the promised one who could come and make all things right. They said this man rose from the dead after being crucified. Paul didn't believe any of this, so he cheered on others when they killed a Christian named Stephen (Acts 7:54-8:1). When he was on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus to arrest Christians, Jesus appeared to him. You can read about that in Acts 9. From that point on, Paul's life was changed. He came to believe that Jesus was the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament, the Son of God who died on the cross to pay the penalty for sins, and who rose from the grave.

Paul was writing to churches in Galatia. There is some debate about which churches exactly, but it seems these are the churches that Paul started in Acts 13 and 14. Galatia was a province of the Roman Empire in what is now Turkey. Paul was probably

writing to them a year or so after he started those churches. He probably wrote this letter in the year AD 48, which was only 15-18 years after Jesus died and rose from the grave.⁴ This may be the first document of the New Testament that was written.

When Paul wrote letters, he usually identified himself, as well as anyone else he represented, and then he identified his audience. Then he would say something like “grace and peace.” Here, Paul writes this:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

And then, Paul would usually say how thankful to God he was for the people he was writing to, and he would often pray for them. For example, when Paul wrote to Christians in the city of Corinth, he wrote these words (1 Cor. 1:4-9):

⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— ⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Even if you don’t understand all of what Paul is saying there, you can tell the tone is very positive. There, Paul is thankful to God for the Corinthians and he prays that God would bless them. Keep in mind that that in that church, the church in Corinth, there were some serious problems. Someone in the church was having sex with his stepmother (1 Cor. 5). Some people were threatening to sue each other (1 Cor. 6:1-7). Others were tempted to all kinds of sexual immorality (1 Cor. 6:9-20). They fought over the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 10-11) and spiritual gifts, too (1 Cor. 12-14). But as bad as things were, Paul started his letter in a positive tone.

Yet here in Galatians, Paul doesn’t write out a thanksgiving. Nor does he pray for them. Instead, Paul starts off angry. He skips those elements and starts off the body of the letter with some harsh words. This is what he writes in verses 6 and 7:

⁴ I believe the “South Galatian” theory is the right one. That is, Paul was writing to the churches in the province of Galatia, not to people also known as “Galatians” who lived in the northern part of what is now Turkey. I also believe that Paul wrote this letter prior to the decisions of the Jerusalem Council, described in Acts 15. If that is the case, this letter can be dated to 48.

⁶ I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— ⁷ not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

Instead of thanking God for the Galatians or praying for them, Paul is expressing his exasperation. He's confused. He can't believe that the Galatians are deserting him who called them in the grace of Christ. Later on in the letter, Paul will call them foolish (3:1, 3). The "him" here is God the Father. God the Father has called the Galatians to faith in Jesus. In Paul's letters, "call" doesn't just mean an invitation. It describes the whole process of bringing these people the message of Christianity and opening up their hearts and minds to receive it. But now these people are deserting God! How are they doing that? Because they are turning to another gospel, because there are some people who have been confusing them with a distorted, false gospel

What is the gospel? The word "gospel" simply means "good news." In Christianity, it is the good news of what God has done for us. God has made a way for us to be put back into a right relationship with him. God has provided a way for us to be acceptable to him. We can be at peace with him. But for us to know why Christianity is good news, we need a little context.

The good news starts with God. There is one God who is triune. This is a hard concept to grasp, but it's unique to Christianity and it's ultimately a beautiful thing. We believe there is one being of God who exists in three Persons: God the Father, God the Son (that's Jesus), and God the Holy Spirit. So there is unity and diversity within God. It's hard to understand how God can be one and three. But the upshot is that God is inherently relational. Before God created the universe, he wasn't lonely. God the Father has always loved the Son, and the Son has always loved the Father, and so on.

Even in the first four verses, we have hints of the Trinity. He mentions God the Father three times (vv. 1, 3, 4). He also hints that Jesus is God in various ways. After all, Paul is an apostle not by the will of any man, but of Jesus. So, Jesus is not just any man. Later in this book, Paul will discuss the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian.

Paul doesn't say anything particular about creation here, but the fact that God created everything is important. When Paul was in Lystra, which was one of the cities in Galatia, he said the "living God . . . made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them" (Acts 14:1).⁵ Since God made everything for himself, the implication is that God owns everything. As

⁵ Paul also affirms creation in Romans 1:18-23 and Acts 17:24-27.

Paul says in Romans 11:36, all things are from, through, and to God. In the beginning, God made a good universe for his own purposes.

Yet something wrong must have happened after God created the universe and everything in it. Paul doesn't spell it out here, but he tells the Galatians, in verse 4, that Jesus "gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age." Somehow, evil came into the world. And Jesus gave himself for Christians by dying on a cross. He died a horrible, painful death. He was killed as if he were a criminal. He died for many reasons: one of Jesus' followers betrayed him to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem; the Jewish leaders thought he was committing blasphemy by claiming to be equal with God; the Jewish leaders handed him over to the Roman rulers who were in charge of Jerusalem, and they killed Jesus to avoid a riot in the city. But ultimately, Jesus died to pay for the sins of his people.

Paul will tell us more about what Jesus did on the cross. For now, I just want to explain the logic: since the power of sin entered the world, God had to drive it out. Sin must be punished. It must be paid for. It is a crime against God and an evil that spoils his good creation. The sin of the world must be punished and rooted out.

I know this talk of sin is frankly off-putting to a lot of people. Yet Paul says we must be delivered—rescued!—from an evil age. That means that this age is evil. And if you're familiar with Paul's letters, you know he doesn't just mean we're inherently good but there's evil outside of us and around us. No, Paul means that there's evil inside of us. We don't do the things we ought to do. In fact, we don't desire to do those things at all. We're selfish. Instead of worshiping the Creator, God, we worship other things. We take lesser things and make them ultimate things. We tend to be selfish. So instead of desiring to know God, worship him, and live life according to his terms, we put other things—things like entertainment, comfort, money, power, sex—first in our lives.

Christianity teaches that we need someone to take our place by bearing the penalty for our sin. If we didn't have a substitute bear our sins for us, we would all die. And we wouldn't just die once, a physical death. Everyone experiences that. If no one paid for our evil, we would die an eternal death, because we would be forever separated from God.

Christianity also teaches that we need a perfect person's righteousness—his moral perfection—to be credited to our account so we can be acceptable to God. We will all be judged

by works, whether they are the things we have done or the things that another has done that have been credited to our account.

And Christianity teaches that we need to be transformed from the inside out. We need a change of heart, a change of character, so we can live as God's people. Paul will discuss all of these things and more over the six chapters of Galatians.

So that's part of the gospel. The rest is that Jesus rose from the grave after dying, to show he paid for sin of his people in full. He rose from the grave to show he has power over death. And he rose from the grave as the first installment—sort of like a down payment—of the new creation, which we are waiting for still. That's because when Jesus rose from the grave, he did so in a body that cannot be killed or harmed. One day, God will recreate the universe to be a perfect place without death. Jews like Paul thought that the resurrection of the dead would happen at the end of human history. They weren't anticipating that one man would rise from the dead in the middle of history. But that's what Jesus did, and it changed everything.

Finally, we should talk about a response to the gospel. The people who are associated with Jesus—who are credited with his righteousness and who have their sins paid for—are those who trust in him. That's what faith means. Faith means you love, obey, and trust Jesus. You trust that he is who the Bible says he is. You trust that what he did by dying on the cross and rising from the grave can make you right with God. You trust that Jesus' way of doing life is better than your way. And God is the one who calls us to that trust. In fact, the good news of this message is that God does the work for us.

That's what grace is. Grace is unmerited favor. It's a gift that we cannot earn and certainly don't deserve. Because it's all God's work, it means two things: one, we cannot brag about our status with God. Christians can never say they earned God's favor. In the last chapter of this letter, Paul will say, "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (6:14). So, an understanding of the gospel removes our pride. Two, because salvation is all God's work, God gets all the credit. God gets the glory forever and ever, as it says in verse 5.

But these false teachers came to the Galatians and taught a different gospel. They were insisting that in order to be right with God, you had to believe in Jesus and obey the law of the Old Testament, the law that God gave to the Israelites through Moses. This would include circumcision for men, but also dietary laws, and special times of worship, including the Sabbath

and various festivals, as well as all the other laws that were given. We'll see this in the rest of Galatians. Paul will tell us that these laws were for a limited time. They were intended to point us to Christ. But now that he has arrived, he has fulfilled the law. We can't earn our way to God by following laws. We can't keep our relationship with God by obeying laws. And no number of laws, no matter how good they are, can transform us from the inside out. So this other "gospel" wasn't good news at all.

Paul insists that there is only one gospel. This goes against all the modern ideas about religions. Some people think all religions are the same. I suppose they make this claim out of sheer ignorance, or out of a desire to marginalize any particular faith, or to blunt the claims of religious adherents that their faith is the true faith. Regarding ignorance, I suppose people claim that all religions are the same, or are equally valid, because they don't know what the various religions teach. The people who make these claims haven't read the whole Bible, and the Qur'an, and other religious texts. If they did, they would see that various religions teach very different things about God and salvation. They teach different things about how to be right with God, and what the afterlife will be like. On the surface, religions look the same. They have holy books, and special meeting places, and priests or pastors or rabbis or imams. They have worship services and prayers and religious rites and holy days.⁶ But the content of each faith is very different, and they can't all be true.

Some people may think that Paul's claim that there is only one good news—in essence, that there's only one way to be right with God—is arrogant and intolerant. But it's not arrogant to say that something is true if it is. It's not narrow, either. All truth is narrow. Two plus two must be four and not three or five. And it's not intolerant, in the true sense. Tolerance assumes that you have differences, but you tolerate people who have differences in beliefs and opinions. You think they're wrong, and you try to persuade them that you are right, but you don't force them or coerce them to change their views. That's what real tolerance is. But tolerance today means acceptance. Yet if we accept everyone else's views, then we're left not believing anything

⁶ Gilbert K. Chesterton, (*Orthodoxy* [New York: John Lane Company, 1909], 238–240) once observed, "There is a phrase of facile liberality uttered again and again at ethical societies and parliaments of religion: "the religions of the earth differ in rites and forms, but they are the same in what they teach." It is false; it is the opposite of the fact. The religions of the earth do *not* greatly differ in rites and forms; they do greatly differ in what they teach. . . . So the truth is that the difficulty of all the creeds of the earth is not as alleged in this cheap maxim: that they agree in meaning, but differ in machinery. It is exactly the opposite. They agree in machinery; almost every great religion on earth works with the same external methods, with priests, scriptures, altars, sworn brotherhoods, special feasts. They agree in the mode of teaching; what they differ about is the thing to be taught."

in particular. If we start believing anything, we'll start believing everything. Everything, that is, except that there's only one valid religion and only one way to God.

Here, Paul is so sure of his message that he says if he comes to the Galatians and teaches something different, or even if an angel comes and gives a different message, he should be accursed. We find that in verses 8 and 9:

⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. ⁹ As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

Paul says that if anyone—whether it's him in the future or even an angel—preaches a different gospel, let him be accursed. In the Greek, the word is *anathema* (ἀνάθεμα). In other words, Paul is saying, “If anyone tells you something different about how to be right with God, let him be damned.” This is tough talk. But that's how seriously Paul takes this issue. To distort the gospel message is to lead people away from Jesus and into condemnation. Anyone who does this will experience the wrath of God. It shows that they never knew the gospel in the first place.

I want to note that it's interesting that Paul mentions angels. In both Islam and Mormonism, the story is that the founders of these religions experienced a new and true revelation from God through an angel. In Islam, the story is that the angel Gabriel appeared the prophet Muhammad in a cave. This was about six hundred years after the time of Jesus. Muhammad then went and told others what the angel told him, and they wrote it down into what would be called the Qur'an. In Mormonism, Joseph Smith said that an angel appeared to him and led him to golden tablets, which contained *Book of Mormon*. That was in the early twentieth century, eighteen hundred years after Jesus. These are both false teachings. Elsewhere, Paul says that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). So either Muhammad and Joseph Smith were lying, or they were deceived by an appearance of a demon, a fallen angel who was not representing God.⁷ At any rate, we should be wary of people who claim a message that is contrary to Christianity.

People continue to distort the gospel of Jesus Christ. Those two ways, again, are legalism—insisting on obeying certain laws to earn or keep God's approval—and licentiousness, or libertinism—breaking all the rules, or throwing them all away. In their own way, both are

⁷ For more information, see the article, “The New Testament vs. the *Book of Mormon* and the Qur'an: Is the Bible the Word of God or the Word of Man?” <http://wbcommunity.org/new-testament-versus-book-mormon>.

centered on the self. The person who tries to be very moral to earn God's love can be very proud. The person who rejects all authority and traditional religious in order to find his or her true self is also proud, and selfish. The problem with both is that they don't work, because they don't take care of the problem of sin.

They also don't give us freedom. Legalism doesn't free us from guilt, or from the unending process of striving to earn God's favor. If you're trying to earn God's favor by obeying laws, you'll end up anxious. If you fail to obey, you'll fall into despair and self-loathing.

Licentiousness—breaking all the rules—doesn't free us from our greatest problem: ourselves. And our desires and addictions often enslave us, and they make bad masters.⁸

Christianity is something different. Christianity acknowledges the importance of rules. There are certain things that are right and certain things that are wrong. But Christianity also teaches forgiveness, and instead of there being a long list of rules to follow, we are given general principles to live by. We're also given the Holy Spirit to guide us in the way that we live. And, most importantly, there's grace. There's forgiveness. Legalism doesn't give us grace and forgiveness. Licentiousness—or self-ism—doesn't give us rules and truth. It leads to chaos and anarchy. But Christianity promises truth and grace. It gives us boundaries but it also gives us forgiveness when we transgress those boundaries.

To be rescued from ourselves, we need someone who can give himself for us. Moses didn't die for the sins of his people, and neither did Muhammad, Buddha, Joseph Smith, or any other religious figure. And no politician, celebrity, entertainer, or athlete can or would do that. But Jesus gave his own life. The only man who ever lived who didn't sin, who didn't disobey and dishonor God, died so that you could be forgiven. God himself became flesh to rescue us from this evil age. What more can we add to that? What more could we ever give to God than his own Son? Our muddled obedience could never add to Jesus' sacrifice.

We'll continue to look at these issues as we explore Galatians. For now, I will simply ask, Do you know this gospel? Do you trust in Jesus or do you rely on yourself? Are you doing life on your own terms or God's? Jesus gave himself for our sins. What more could we ask?

⁸ Peter also wrote about false teachers. In this case, they were teaching some form of sexual immorality. "They [the false teachers] promise them [the ones they were teaching/influencing] freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved" (2 Pet. 2:19).