

*“Gospel” the Faithfulness of Christ Among the Gentiles:
A Study of the Letters to the Galatians and Thessalonians*

Diocese of West Texas

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Study and Reflection Session 1:

Can “Gospel” be a Verb? (Gal 1:1-10)

A Translation for Study, with Commentary

Translation of Gal 1:1-5

Galatians 1:1 Paul an apostle – sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the father, who raised him from the dead – 2 and all the members of God's family 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 so that he might deliver us out of the present evil age according to the will of our God and father, 5 to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Commentary on Gal 1:1-5

Paul the apostle. In this opening paragraph, Paul asserts his own status as an “apostle.”

- In Greek, the word means one who is “sent,” an emissary from someone else.
- According to Paul, his authority comes directly from Jesus Christ and from God, rather than from any human source.

This is no ordinary authority! Paul makes it clear that the source of his apostleship and authority – God, together with Jesus Christ –

trumps any *human* source of authority and apostleship, especially of these outsiders who have come into the churches of Galatia, possibly from the church in Jerusalem, to oppose Paul's earlier teaching (see the Introduction to Galatians).

Paul's authority comes with power. Paul is also quick to acknowledge that his authority is powerful. It is not derived from any human status or position, but from the life-giving power of God the father, the one "who raised him [Jesus] from the dead." This is no ordinary power, but rather the same power that created all that exists!

Paul is not a maverick. He writes not only on his own behalf, but for "all the members of God's family who are with me." In other words, there are other followers of Christ who agree with what he is about to tell them in this letter!

The cross and our freedom. In verse 4, Paul incorporates an early Jewish-Christian interpretation of the death of Jesus as an atoning sacrifice for human sins. Paul chooses to emphasize the fact that God's deepest purpose for humankind is FREEDOM, freedom from every form of evil, from within or without. It was to this purpose that Jesus gave himself completely. Throughout his letters, Paul uses this characterization to highlight what he sees as the essence of the human life of Jesus Christ, "the one who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20). For Paul, the faithfulness of Jesus Christ lies in his willingness to give himself for others according to the will of God. Note that "giving himself" has to do with the way he lived for others, as well as his willingness to die.

Verse 4: Paul's "two-age thinking."

- In the first century world of Judaism under Rome, there were some Jews who believed that the present age was under the power of destructive, evil forces working in a way contrary to the will of God.

- They also believed that, at some point, God would intervene in the world to set things right by defeating the forces of evil with God's eternal, life-giving power.
- In verse 4, above, Paul applies this "two-age thinking." He interprets the death of Jesus as taking place "so that he might deliver us out of the present evil age according to the will of God" and, by implication, into God's new age.

Paul thus asserts that Christ's voluntary self-giving, including his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, have *already inaugurated* a new age of life and peace through the power of God, even if that new age is *not yet complete*.

In these opening verses, however, Paul does not say exactly how this "deliverance" might take place. He suggests that the "deliverance" of the Galatians may be a process that is merely underway or even just a future possibility. The readers and listeners can assume he will clarify this during the course of the letter.

Translation of Gal 1:6-7

1:6 I am astonished that you are so quickly turning away from [*metatithēmi*] the one who called you in the power [*charis*] of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – 7 not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and wanting to pervert the gospel of Christ.

Commentary on Gal 1:6-7

Paul is aggravated and rebukes the Galatians. In this letter, Paul skips the traditional “thanksgiving” paragraph, in which he would normally give thanks for the recipients of the letter or state his desire to be with them.

- Inclusion of a thanksgiving paragraph was a common convention in first century letter-writing.
- The absence of this standard part of the letter gives us – and the listeners in Galatia – a clue to Paul’s aggravated state of mind in writing to them.

He gets right to the point of the letter: “I am astonished!” This was a typical statement of disappointment and rebuke in letters that sought to bring about some kind of change in the recipient’s behavior. Paul immediately explains the rebuke. The Galatians are turning away (*meta-tithēmi*) from God, who called them in the power (*charis*) of Christ.

- Paul is not using the verb *meta-tithēmi* in any sort of abstract way. In Paul’s view, the Galatians are, by their actions, in the process of turning away from God (“the one who called you”!).

In Paul’s language, the Galatians are deserting his Law-free gospel authorized by God and Christ to another so-called “gospel” taught by these outside teachers, who insist upon observance of the Jewish Law.

- From Paul’s point of view, these outside teachers are interfering with the good work he has already done with God’s approval in the churches of Galatia.
- Keep in mind that, even though Paul does not mention the Jewish Law at this early point in the letter, he is nevertheless writing to people who know the issue being addressed. They know full well that some or all of them are being persuaded by these outsider teachers to undergo circumcision and to submit themselves to the observance of the Torah.

TWO IMPORTANT GREEK WORDS: *Charis* and *Euangelion*

CHARIS

Paul reminds the Galatians that they first experienced the life-giving power of God (*charis*) unrelated to any observance of the Jewish Law (see also Gal 3:1-5).

The Greek word, *charis*, most often translated as “grace,” signifies the outpouring into the world of God’s life-giving power (the same power that raised Jesus from the dead).

- To translate *charis* as “grace” is correct, but it misses the full force that Paul intends the word to convey.
- ***Charis*, or “grace,” is God’s life-giving power poured out into the world, bringing new life in the most radical ways possible.**
- As Paul argues here, the Galatians experienced that radical, life-giving power *not* through their own observance of the Jewish Law, but “in the power of Christ” through Paul’s proclamation of his Law-free gospel among them.

EUANGELION

It appears that the Jewish-Christian teachers are also calling their Law-observant teaching “gospel” (*euangelion*), a Greek noun most frequently translated as “gospel” or “good news.”

- **In the Roman political world** of the first century, *euangelion* was an imperial proclamation concerning the “good news” of the peace that the emperor Augustus brought to the Roman world (Williams, 39).
- **The early followers of Jesus appropriated the term** to describe the “good news” of *what God is doing in the world* in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- **From Paul’s point of view**, an important consequence of what God is doing in the world through Jesus Christ is the abolition of the dividing line between Jew and Gentile, a dividing line consisting, in large part, of all the requirements of the Jewish Law.

- His understanding of the “good news” is *freedom* from the Law, a freedom that unites Jew and Gentile in one saving pattern of life.
- **The outside teachers in Galatia** are insisting on observance of the Jewish Law and, consequently, are not bringing “good news” to the Galatians.
 - **Paul argues that there is only one gospel** and it is the Law-free gospel that he proclaims. Therefore, those who are advocating observance of the Law are “perverting” the “good news” of Christ.
 - **It is critical to note that Paul is using his rhetorical skills here to try to persuade the Galatians to turn back to his Law-free gospel.**
 - **We must be careful not to demonize these other Jewish-Christians** to whom Paul is referring, just because they held a different view than Paul about the necessity of Law observance in the early church. In fact, at the time of this letter, these outside teachers were proclaiming the *majority* view about the necessity for observance of the Jewish Law in early Christianity!

Translation of Gal 1:8-10

8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should gospel [*euangelizomai*] to you contrary to what we gospeled [*euangelizomai*] to you, let that one be accursed! **9** As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone gospels [*euangelizomai*] you contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed! **10** Am I now trying to persuade people or God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a slave of Christ.

Commentary on Gal 1:8-10

Can the word “gospel” be a verb?

In 1:8-9 we encounter the verb *euangelizomai*. It shares the same root as *euangelion*, which we translated as “gospel” or the “good news” of what God is doing in the world.

- The verb form of “*euangelion*” – *euangelizomai* – is most often translated as “to bring good news,” “to preach good news,” “to proclaim good news,” or “to announce good news.”
- Some of you may recall our study of Romans last year, where we highlighted that, **for Paul, the “gospel” is more than just some “good news” spoken by an orator or preacher. Gospel is the very power of God for salvation to all those who are faithful (Rom 1:16-17).**

Thus, the “gospel” is not just a spoken message, but also an experience of God’s life-giving power that is poured out for the life of the world. For Paul, the “gospel” is an *event* that takes place in the world from time to time when people experience this life-giving power of God associated with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

- Consequently, when Paul uses the verb *euangelizomai*, he is not just referring to an oral act of preaching by someone *about* the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- Instead, he is talking about the *embodiment* of Christ’s death and resurrection in the life of one of God’s emissaries (or even a particular congregation!) that brings about other people’s experience of this life-giving power of God.
- As apostles, Paul and others become instruments of God’s life-giving power through their proclamation of the gospel *in word and deed*.

Paul calls on the Galatians to take responsibility for ridding the community of these teachers who are threatening their well-being.

- In vv. 8-9, Paul invokes a curse on those outsiders who are demanding that the Galatians submit to circumcision and the observance of the Jewish Law.
- He thereby calls on the Galatians to take responsibility for ridding the community of these teachers who are threatening their well-being.
- According to Paul, these outsiders are interfering with the Galatians' relationship to God, a relationship that was once pleasing to God but now is in question.

It is critical to remember that Paul is invoking this curse on *fellow Christians*, who are probably emissaries from Peter, James, and John – the Jewish leaders who are the pillars of the early Christian movement centered in Jerusalem.

- We sometimes read about these emissaries from Jerusalem as “opponents” or “enemies” of Paul, or as “agitators” in Paul’s churches.
- **Once again, we must be careful not to characterize these *representatives of the majority view in early Christianity* as evil or sinister, simply because they disagree with Paul’s view of what the gospel requires of people.** Doing so affords too much power to Paul’s rhetorical flourishes, calculated to turn the Galatians away from these other teachers, and to persuade them to return to Paul’s point of view regarding the Law.

Paul’s aim is to act in ways that are pleasing to *God*.

- In v. 10, Paul reminds the Galatians that he, himself, once worked to please people, when he was a zealous Jew who persecuted the church (see Gal 1:11-17 in the next session).
- But he is no longer “still” trying to please people. Instead, his sole aim is to act in ways that are pleasing to God as a slave of Christ. In that capacity alone, he mediates God’s life-giving power to the world.
- **Paul thereby implies that the Galatians, too, are now trying to please people (the outside teachers) rather than God. According to Paul, this is a dangerous course of action!**

Questions for Reflection

1. The conflict in the Galatian churches revolves around two different “gospels” being proclaimed to members of the churches. One involves observance of the Jewish Law; the other is from Paul, who proclaims a Law-free gospel. At this early point in our study, how would you characterize some differences between “Law-observance” and a “Law-free” gospel? How does each affect the relationship between the believer and God? between the believer and Jews? between the believer and Gentiles?
2. What do you think about Paul’s argument that there is only “one gospel” and it is *his* Law-free gospel? Knowing that other New Testament writers proclaim a gospel that is much more friendly to the observance of the Jewish Law (the Gospel of Matthew, for instance), what impact do you think Paul’s argument might have had on the wider group of non-Pauline churches in the first century? What impact do you think Paul’s words might have had on his own congregations in Galatia? Are there people in today’s church claiming that other teachers and leaders are “perverting the gospel of Christ”? Do you think Paul’s language in Galatians supports such a position? How might such a strategy be *constructive*? How might it be *destructive*?
3. How do you feel about Paul’s rhetorical invocation of a curse (vv. 8, 9) on the Jewish-Christian teachers who are proclaiming a gospel contrary to Paul’s gospel? Do you see similar things happening in the church today? How do you feel about that? How do you think God regards such “rhetorical flourishes”?
4. Review the commentary on Gal 1:8-10. Tell a story about a recent event when you or someone you know “gospelled” Christ by words and/or deeds? Be specific!

5. Can you tell a story about a recent time when you tried to please people rather than God? What was the result? In retrospect, what do you wish you had done?