

February 16, 2014
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Galatians
Community Baptist Church
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to study Galatians 2:1-10.

1. How many years did Paul preach the gospel before he went to the Jerusalem council?
2. What was the controversy at the Jerusalem council?
3. What freedom did the false teachers desire to take from Christians?
4. What was Paul's opinion of Peter, James, and John?

PRESERVING THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL Galatians 2:1-10

Seminarians have the great advantage of accessing a long history of hammering out the truth of the gospel. There is really no new, uncharted territory when it comes to the simple and foundational truths of the Good News. Many of our Christian forefathers have fought the battles with false teachers, have studied and restudied the statements of Scripture, and have written down the truths in modern terminology again and again. And the scholars continue to plumb the depths of Scripture and to record their findings. I noticed the other day that John Frame has published a new systematic theology. I suspect that it will be quite good and accurate. However, at the same time, I suspect that it will not contain any new revelation—no novel

truths about the gospel. Rather it will be a restatement of the same undying, foundational truths about God's redemptive plan, maybe viewing a different facet of the truth here and there.

Paul, Barnabas, and Titus didn't have fifty published systematic theologies to consult when they had questions about the gospel. They did have plenty of false teachers who accused them of error and pointed to personal preferences where they claimed that Paul and company had strayed from God's plan. Who would they consult to be sure they were right? Was there an individual or group of individuals who had godly insight and who carried enough authority to affirm that Paul and Barnabas were teaching the gospel accurately?

There are two important themes or truths obvious in our text. First is the reality that Satan presents a pseudo-gospel through his teachers. Those teachers loudly, boldly insist that their doctrine is truth. Second is that reality that God has committed His truth of the gospel to mere men to whom He has given authority to preserve the truth and who, therefore, must preserve the truth.

Concern For Accuracy of the Gospel (vv.1-3).

Paul was not a "Lone Ranger" shooting the gospel gun whenever, however he chose to. Paul desired to have agreement with other apostles on this matter of "what constitutes the gospel" (vv.1-2). So after he was well on in the ministry, Paul went to headquarters in Jerusalem (v.1). He rehearsed the event for the churches in Galatia when he wrote, *Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me (v.1).*

This was Paul's third trip to Jerusalem after he had been re-born on the Damascus Road. The first time, three years after his conversion, he had gone and spent about fifteen days with Peter and met with James (1:18; Acts 9:26-28). Then some years later, he and Barnabas had taken an offering from Antioch to help the Christians who suffered famine in Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30). That trip was short and insignificant and he did not meet with any of the leaders of the Church as far as we know.

Then fourteen years after the first trip he, Barnabas, and Titus went to Jerusalem. This means that Paul had been preaching the gospel for seventeen years without having been instructed by the

other apostles or teachers. How did he know what to preach? How could he tell if he was accurate with the gospel? Paul taught what he learned from Jesus through unique revelation while in Arabia (1:17). Now, after seventeen years of preaching, he went to Jerusalem to check with the other apostles who were there. This is most likely that Acts 15 council where the leaders grappled with God's giving the gospel to Gentiles and what should be expected of the new converts.

Again, Paul went to this meeting because he wanted to be sure (v.2). *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 (v.2).* More than having just a feeling that it might be good to go, you will notice that Paul was motivated by a revelation to go to Jerusalem. What does that mean? It is possible that this was revelation through the Holy Spirit as He directed the "church" to appoint representatives to go and argue the case of work-free gospel to the apostles and elders (Acts 15:3). Or it is possible that this was another of multiple cases where Jesus spoke directly to Paul. This would not have been the first time for him to hear from Jesus. Jesus spoke to Paul quite clearly on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:4-6). Jesus had spoken to Paul again when he needed to leave Jerusalem for safety's sake (Acts 22:18). It would seem that Paul hears something from the Lord when he was caught up to the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:1-10). Does it count as hearing from the Lord when God sent the angel to encourage him during the storm at sea (Acts 27:22-26)?

There are times when God leads us through circumstances and even times when He leads through strong inclinations. The danger involved with such means of discerning God's will is the tendency to interject human feelings or wisdom into the situation. When seeking God's will, it is best to weigh the choice against the clear teaching of Scripture. If Scripture does not address the issue, seek the wisdom of older, godly saints. All of this assumes you have prayed diligently about the matter. Sometimes a servant of God just knows what he or she must do. Rarely does God do a miracle of a vision or speaking. Never does God give new revelation.

However it happened in Paul's case, God made it clear that he needed to go to Jerusalem and get this matter settled. His goal was to

set before the *influential people* the gospel he was proclaiming. The influential people were the apostles who were still alive and in Jerusalem and the elders (leaders) of the Church. Paul set the gospel he had preached for the past seventeen years before them for their consideration. At issue in particular was whether the gospel is the story of salvation through God's grace, or salvation through personal works. For seventeen years Paul had preached: *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).* Professing Christians from Judea came to Antioch and told him he was mistaken in his teaching. Therefore, Paul desired to have confirmed that he was not preaching error. His conscience was clear. But what if he was wrong? Who could say if he was wrong? The church leaders in Jerusalem.

In the same way, God has placed authorities in our lives for His own glory. Each time I study a passage of Scripture, I have dozens of God's servants from the past looking over my shoulder. I have no qualms in resorting to what God has taught men in the past (we call them commentators). I would be foolish to think that I am able to arrive at practical, useful truth on my own. So, too, in your life, it is suitable for you to consult others who have walked the path before you. Not to consider what they have learned, presuming that you know better than they do, is the height of arrogance. Paul, of all people, was not beyond hearing what his fellow apostles had learned regarding the gospel.

The gist of the meeting was that the other apostles did not require Titus to practice Jewish tradition (v.3). Paul recounted, *But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek (v.3).* Paul purposely chose a convert named Titus, who was an uncircumcised Greek, to go with them. Titus was a full Gentile who had come to salvation by faith in Jesus Christ's finished work. He was a recipient of God's grace, just as Peter told the council. *But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will (Acts 15:11).* As a Gentile, it would have been highly unlikely that Titus would have been circumcised. Therefore, he was living proof that a person could be born again, live a life that reflects the new birth, and not participate in Jewish rites or traditions.

The “salvation by works” people put great pressure on Paul and company to conform to their false doctrine. Paul refused to concede to the pressure of the Judaizers and probably took Titus to the council as living proof of his argument that works are not necessary for salvation. But is it possible that Paul was inconsistent on this point? Contrast Paul’s treatment of Timothy. When Paul took Timothy to be part of the church planting team, he had him circumcised. Why the difference? He did this because: “of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek” (Acts 16:3). Timothy’s father was a Greek, which explains why he had not been circumcised as a child. His mother was a Jew. So should his Jewish half be circumcised and his Gentile half remain uncircumcised? That would be rather impossible. Therefore, since Timothy was half Jew, Paul recommended circumcision. Titus, on the other hand, proved Paul’s point that the gospel does not require outward activity in order to gain salvation.

The apostles had no problem with Titus’s physical condition. Circumcision was an outward sign required for Israelites in the law of Moses. The leaders of the church concluded that such a sign was not necessary for salvation. And the Gentiles rejoiced to hear the news (Acts 15:31). However, the council leaders did require that the people separate from things polluted by idols, live sexually pure lives (which Jesus also taught), and abstain from eating strangled animals and eating blood (Acts 15:20-21). Why all these extraneous rules? These commands were given because people in all that part of the world were aware of the Law of Moses as it was read in the synagogues. But these were matters of practice not attempts to gain salvation. The Gentiles needed to realize that genuine salvation results in sanctified practices.

Contending for the Gospel’s Application (vv.4-6).

False brothers had a problem with Paul’s gospel, which was also the council’s gospel (v.4). *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 – (v.4).* Does it grieve your soul to read that false brothers were secretly brought in? They didn’t just happen to show up. They were not citizens of

Antioch. These were professing Christians, supposedly Jewish converts to the gospel. They might have been sent by so-called converts who belonged to the party of the Pharisees. Not satisfied to cause trouble only in Antioch, those same people confronted Paul at the council (Acts 15:5).

Paul identified them as **false brothers**, which means that they were not Christians at all. These guys sowed discord among the brothers and debated with Paul and Barnabas in Antioch. They were the men who came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “*Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.*” And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question (Acts 15:1-2). The apostles referred to these false brothers at the council by saying, “*Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions*” (Acts 15:24). Notice that the apostles emphasized that these guys were not part of them, not sent by them, and, therefore, not part of the Body of Christ. They were the kind of people John described: “*They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us*” (1 John 2:19). They were false teachers, who believed false doctrine, who taught it and learned it among themselves, and were quite convinced that it was truth.

Paul described the teachers as false brothers who desired slavery for people who Christ had set free. Their teaching that salvation is won and held by doing good works leads to bondage. The bondage comes from the chains forged by human wisdom as it makes up the rules that sinners must do in order to win and keep favor with God. Such rules are enslaving because no one can keep them consistently, and to try to do so makes it impossible for us to have freedom to serve Christ.

The error can sound so convincing. What if reading three chapters in the Bible each day, praying for thirty minutes, attending meetings of the church Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening, as well as giving 10% of your gross income was required in order for us to gain salvation? We would be so distracted

by doing such things that we would not have time to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves. We would be so concerned about accomplishing those works consistently that we would neglect encouraging others, finding out how to intercede in prayer for others, and would be unable to worship God from our heart. We would always be concerned if we are meeting the standard of whoever set it. Our conscience knows that we can never achieve the righteousness of Christ through our own strength. Attempting to do so is very enslaving.

Paul and company did not yield to the pressure (v.5). He confessed, *To them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you (v.5)*. They stood their ground. Because Paul loved the body for which Christ had shed His blood, he was always quite agitated at people like this who stirred up controversy unnecessarily. Like Paul, we should remember that God is not happy when people cause restlessness and upheaval in the Body of Christ. Paul worked to preserve peace and unity. Therefore, he would not give an inch when the Pharisees leveled accusations against him. Someone might argue that Paul would have opened the door to peace if he would have humbled himself and agreed with the teachers. True peace is never built on a foundation of error or built with the mortar of pride and arrogance (which is the essential character of legalism).

Paul and company stood fast in truth and, in doing so, they preserved the truth of the gospel. Paul's chief concern was not that he would be proven right. His chief concern was that the people he taught in the churches would have the truth of the gospel untarnished. Each generation must take that same unyielding stand in order that future generations will hear the same good news.

Furthermore, it became evident that Paul was true to the gospel when the influential leaders did not require him to yield (v.6). *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 (v.6)*. Those words, “who seemed to be influential” sound a bit odd. What was Paul's opinion of the leaders? The phrase speaks of the apostles in Jerusalem as men who appeared to be something. The fact that Paul used the same phrase four times in eight verses, added to the fact that he said that Peter,

James and John seemed to be pillars, almost sounds sarcastic. It was. But not because Paul disrespected the other apostles. It is obvious that Paul respected these men or he would not have desired an audience with them, nor would he have set his case before them. Rather, these statements put in this particular letter reminded Paul's adversaries that they were the ones who made a big deal about the original apostles. They accused Paul of being a “lesser” apostle because he was not with Jesus during His earthly ministry.

Paul reminded such accusers that God did not show partiality between him and them. But didn't Jesus pick Peter, James, and John to be inner circle? Yes. Didn't Jesus pick Peter to be leader of the twelve? Yes. Didn't Jesus tell Peter not to worry about the favor He would show John in giving him length of life? Yes. The phrase about partiality means that God is not impressed with external credentials. The leading apostles had been fishermen. Paul had been a persecutor. Because God is not impressed with credentials, what people were in the past didn't impress or bother Paul either. The Pharisees were impressed with personal accomplishments, but God is not and Paul was not.

The important issue is that the leading apostles added no requirements. They did not require works for salvation, because that is not what Jesus taught. Paul gladly accepted their conclusion and respected their decision.

Confirmation of the Gospel Ministry (vv.7-10).

It became obvious to the council that God was working His plan (vv.7-8). The apostles understood the breadth of God's plan for the gospel (v.7). *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 (v.7)*. The word “saw” means to discern or perceive. It is a bit different in meaning from another word for “saw” (*blepo*), which means to see with the eye or in a figurative sense to see with the mind's eye (to imagine). This word (*eido*) means to have perceived or come to the right conclusion through investigations or examination. It is like the conclusions of the people of Berea who searched the Scripture in order to *see* if Paul was

teaching truth (Acts 17:11). Likewise, it was obvious to the apostles through the Holy Spirit's leading that this was God's plan.

The apostles realized that God authored the plan (v.8). They said, *For he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles, (v.9)*. Was that accurate? We know that Jesus Christ plainly told Paul that he would be the apostle who took the gospel to the Gentiles. Christ told Ananias, *“Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15)*. At the same time, it is obvious from Paul's ministry that he almost always sought out the Jews in the synagogue to present Christ to them first when he entered a city. Nevertheless, his ministry was not in Palestine but in the farther reaches of the Roman Empire among the Gentiles.

But what about Peter's ministry. There seems to be no precise statement from God that Peter's focus was toward the Jews. It is true that he began preaching the gospel in Jerusalem. But he was among the first to declare the gospel to the Gentiles (Cornelius's house). At the council in Jerusalem, Peter's testimony about the gospel to the Gentiles was foundational (Acts 15:7). Nevertheless, it seemed obvious that Peter's focus would be the Jews even as Paul's focus would be Gentiles. So the council concluded that this was all of God's doing. It appeared that God desired two distinct avenues for the gospel: one to Jews, one to Gentiles. At this point, the apostles agreed that Paul was on the same level of authority as Peter. This would become an important issue soon enough.

Sometimes God's will is obvious through the practical ramifications of His leading through circumstances. There is not always a direct statement in Scripture about the common practices, plans, and methods for ministry. Much of what the Church does today is the result of common sense conclusions that do not breach the Bible's clear principles and commands. And these things constantly change. It is okay to say, “I don't prefer that method.” But it is not always okay to say, “They are doing it wrong.”

Grace perceived results in fellowship (vv.9-10). The apostles were perceptive (v.9a). Paul wrote, *and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me (v.9a)*. The term pillars refers to someone who had the

reputation for being great teachers. Paul used the term “seemed to be” sarcastically to throw the authority of the apostles back in the face of the false teachers who claimed that Peter, James, and John were authorities but Paul was not. Paul agreed that those men were authorities, and they placed Barnabas and him on par with them.

The apostles gave their approval to the ministry of Paul and his friends (vv.9b-10). The right hand of fellowship signaled affirmation. Paul said that *they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised (v.9a)*. In that culture, grasping the right hands was an affirmation of friendship, partnership, and commitment. Instead of rebuking Paul as the false teachers had hoped would happen, the apostles soundly affirmed their ministry. With one string attached. *Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do (v.10)*. This was a critical need in the first century. Generally the rest of New Testament teaching focuses this care on the poor in the Body of Christ. It is one of the most practical expressions of Christian love. Helping the poor, abstaining from illicit sex, and abstaining from things offered to idols and blood is not legalism—it is the practical outworking of a changed heart. Sometimes we attach too many strings to the one string attached. But that is another sermon.

We do well to stand with Paul, Barnabas, and Titus on the simple message of the gospel. Since the beginning of the Church until this present day there have been those people who teach that salvation is gained by our works that impress God. There is nothing we can do to impress God. We are still saved by faith through God's grace.