

Galatians

Only One Gospel!

Galatians 2:1-10

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Scripture

Today we continue our study in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Let us read Galatians 2:1-10:

¹ Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. ² I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain. ³ Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. ⁴ This matter arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. ⁵ We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.

⁶ As for those who seemed to be important—whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance—those men added nothing to my message. ⁷ On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. ⁸ For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. ⁹ James, Peter and John, those reputed to be 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 Jews. ¹⁰ All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. (Galatians 2:1-10)

Introduction

Galatians is Paul's most explosive letter. In vigorous language Paul sets forth the gospel of grace, and the effects of it have

transformed the world. At the heart of the letter is the doctrine of grace. It teaches us that God's grace is for sinners.

This is the truth that gripped Martin Luther, the Roman Catholic monk who lived in the sixteenth century. He labored diligently to earn favor with God, but it didn't work.

Luther once said, "If ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, I would have got there too. All the brothers with me will testify to that. For if I had gone on much longer, I would simply have martyred myself to death with vigils, prayers, reading and other work."¹

But then the grace of God broke through his troubled conscience into his mind by means of Paul's words to the Romans, "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it has been written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Romans 1:17).

Listen to Luther's own words, "Then I began to comprehend the 'righteousness of God' through which the righteous are saved by God's grace, namely, through faith; that the 'righteousness of God' which is revealed through the Gospel was to be understood in a passive sense in which God through mercy justifies a man by faith, as it is written, 'The righteous will live by faith.' Now I felt exactly as though I had been born again, and I believed that I had entered Paradise through widely opened doors. . . . As violently as I had formerly hated the expression 'the righteousness of God,' so I was now as violently compelled to embrace the new conception of grace and, thus, for me, the expression of the Apostle really opened the Gates of Paradise."²

This is the truth that was being attacked in the Galatian churches. False teachers (known as "Judaizers") were distorting the gospel of God's grace. They taught that righteousness from God came by faith in Christ *and* by the works of the Law. Unfortunately, the Christians in the Galatian churches believed this teaching and were losing their joy in the gospel.

¹ Gerhard Ritter, *Luther: His Life and Work* (New York and Evanston, 1963), 53.

² E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective* (St. Louis, 1950), 286.

Now, the *facts* of the gospel were not at stake. The Galatians—and the Judaizers, for that matter—believed that Jesus died and was buried. They also believed that three days later he rose from the dead and was seen by many other people (cf. I Corinthians 15:3-5). These facts were not in dispute.

However, it was in the *terms* on which the benefits of Christ's work were received that the conflict lay. The Judaizers insisted that the benefits of Christ's work become theirs only by keeping the Law of Moses (which included circumcision).

It was this that stirred Paul up and got him heated, "Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all" (Galatians 5:2). In Galatians 3:11 he says, "Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith."

And so the issue is clear. For the Judaizers the gospel is faith *plus* works. For Paul the gospel is faith *alone apart from* works.

Now this ancient conflict has contemporary relevance. There are some today who believe that salvation involves believing in Jesus *plus* doing good works. These good works include baptism, confirmation, church attendance, partaking of the sacraments, and so on. We have to be clear and stand with the apostle Paul and say that this is a "different gospel" (cf. 1:6). The gospel of grace is faith *alone* in Jesus Christ plus nothing else.

Lesson

In the first chapter of Galatians, Paul shows his independence from the other apostles concerning his commission, reception and understanding of the gospel. The gospel of grace that the apostle taught is the true gospel because he was commissioned by Christ and taught by Christ. He therefore refutes the Judaizers' objection that his message is a distorted, human version of the true gospel.

Now, in chapter two, Paul spells out his close relationship with the apostolic church leaders. He spells this out to answer the argument that his gospel was not approved by the high officials in

the church at Jerusalem. Paul explains that not only he but also his message was accepted and affirmed by the Jerusalem apostles.

I. Paul's Companions (2:1)

First, let's notice Paul's companions.

Paul says in verse 1 that **fourteen years later he went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas**. This was after his first visit to see Peter (cf. 1:18). The fourteen year period indicates how long Paul had been preaching the gospel of grace among the Gentiles before returning to any of the other apostles.

Barnabas was a circumcised Jewish believer. His name—**Barnabas**—means “Son of Encouragement” (cf. Acts 4:36), and his life described his name. After Paul became a Christian, **Barnabas** was the one who vouched for him to the other apostles who had first rejected him out of fear (cf. Acts 9:26-27).

Later, **Barnabas** was sent by the church leaders in Jerusalem to investigate what they had heard about Gentiles accepting the Christian faith in Antioch (cf. Acts 11:19-22). **Barnabas** confirmed the reports, and he spent time encouraging the new converts and their leaders. Realizing that Paul could help him tremendously, **Barnabas** left Antioch in search of him. The two men returned to Antioch and worked for a year together, grounding spiritually young Christians in their faith (cf. Acts 11:23-26).

Barnabas repeatedly demonstrated his confidence in Paul. It is no wonder that Paul brought him on his return trip to Jerusalem.

Paul not only took **Barnabas**. He **took Titus along also**. **Titus** was a Gentile believer the Judaizers thought should be circumcised (cf. vv. 3-4). **Titus** was a test case for the validity of the gospel of faith plus nothing. His conversion stood as evidence that a person is saved apart from the works required by the Mosaic Law.

II. Paul's Message (2:2-3)

Second, let's observe Paul's message.

Paul emphasizes that his prolonged absence from Jerusalem ended because **he went in response to a revelation** (2:2a). How did this revelation come to Paul? We don't know.

But we do know what the content of the revelation was. Paul was told to go to Jerusalem **and set before them the gospel that he preached among the Gentiles**. He also **did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders**, to the highly respected and revered leaders in the Jerusalem church.

Now the purpose of this meeting was *not* to verify the truth of his gospel message. Christ had already done so in previous revelation (cf. 1:12).

The reason Paul met with the **leaders** was to get the highest stamp of approval for his gospel of grace and ministry to the Gentiles (vv. 2a, 6-9). Why? So the church could be unified and his critics de-fanged. After all, if the apostles gave Paul their support, no one could then challenge him by saying that he did not have the backing of the church's leadership.

The issue at stake was the gospel. Did a person have to follow the works of the law in addition to faith in Christ in order to be justified before God? As I said, Titus was a test case. He was not circumcised, and apparently, after discussion with the Jerusalem leaders, they agreed with Paul that **not even Titus, who was with him, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek**, that is, a non-Jew. The Jerusalem leaders affirmed Paul's message that the gospel is faith *plus* nothing.

III. Paul's Critics (2:4-5)

Third, Paul mentions his critics.

Wherever Paul went, the Judaizers dogged his steps. In verse 4 Paul even calls them **"false brothers"** who **"had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have Christ Jesus and to make us slaves."**

How did Paul and the other leaders respond to them? Paul tells us in no uncertain terms in verse 5: **"We did not give in to**

them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you” (Acts 15:4-29). Nothing was added to or subtracted from the gospel of faith alone. Against the critics, the church leaders stood as one man agreeing on the essential nature of the gospel. And so they dashed the **false brothers’** hopes of dividing the leadership of Christ’s Church.

IV. Paul’s Endorsement (2:6-10)

Finally, let’s take a look at Paul’s endorsement.

The men who endorsed Paul, his ministry, and his message were **James, Peter and John**—all apostles Paul calls **“leaders,”** men **“who seemed to be important,”** and **“those reputed to be pillars”** (2:2, 6, 9). These three men had tremendous authority and influence. In fact, between them, they wrote seven of the New Testament books. If we include Paul’s writings, we have the human authors of twenty of the twenty-seven New Testament books. This conference was a summit meeting of the highest order.

These leaders gave their total support to Paul and Barnabas, offering them **the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to Paul**. Moreover, **they agreed that Paul and Barnabas should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews**. The only request that they made of Paul and Barnabas was that they **should continue to remember the poor**, a request Paul was eager to keep.

Now, let’s zoom in on the threefold endorsement given to Paul and explore what it says to us today.

A. They Saw Paul’s Distinctive Contribution (2:7)

First, they saw Paul’s distinctive contribution.

The apostolic leaders realized that Paul **had been given the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been given the task of preaching the gospel to the Jews**. God

had gifted Paul to meet the needs of a certain group of people, and Paul used his gifts to do what God wanted him to accomplish.

God does the same today. Each of us has been given varied abilities and desires to serve different kinds of people. You need to discover what your gifts are and cultivate and use them to honor God. You have a unique and distinctive contribution to make to the advancement of the gospel. You may not think that your contribution is great and grand and glorious but let me assure you that it is.

During World War II, when Britain was experiencing its darkest days, the country had a difficult time keeping men in the coal mines. Many wanted to give up their dirty, thankless jobs in the dangerous mines to join the military service, which garnered much public praise and support. Yet their work in the mines was critical to the war. Without coal, the military and the people at home would be in trouble.

So Prime Minister Winston Churchill faced thousands of coal miners one day and told them of their importance to the war effort, and how their role could make or break the goal of maintaining England's freedom.

Churchill painted a picture of what it would be like when the war ended, and the grand parade that would honor the people who fought the war. First would come the sailors of the Navy, the people who continued the tradition of Trafalgar and the defeat of the Spanish Armada. Next would come the best and brightest of Britain, the pilots of the Royal Air Force, who fended off the German Luftwaffe. Following them would be the soldiers who fought at Dunkirk. Last of all would come the coal-dust-covered men in miners' caps.

Churchill indicated that someone from the crowd might say, "Where were they during the critical days of the struggle?" And the voices of thousands of men would respond, "We were in the earth with our faces to the coal."

It's said that tears appeared in the eyes of the hardened men. And they returned to their inglorious work with steely resolve,

having been reminded of the role they were playing in their country's noble goal of pursuing freedom for the Western World.³

Just like the apostle Paul, you have a distinctive contribution to make to the noble goal of advancing spiritual freedom.

B. They Accepted Paul as much as They Accepted Peter (2:8)

Second, they accepted Paul as much as they accepted Peter.

The apostolic leaders saw that though Peter and Paul had diverse ministries, their energy came from the same source—God. Paul says in verse 8, **“For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles.”** Therefore, they approved and supported each man and his work.

John Newton, author of “Amazing Grace,” was a pastor in the late eighteenth century. Newton had been a slave trader before God transformed his life. He became well-known as an outstanding preacher of the grace of God. One aspect of Newton that I particularly appreciate is the way in which he worked with pastors from a variety of evangelical perspectives. He encouraged those who differed from him because his ultimate concern was the advancement of the gospel.

We, too, need to affirm others whose lives bear the handprint of God. All Christians, especially new ones, need to be accepted for who they are and what they can become in Christ. We need to encourage and support those who are faithfully serving Christ, especially in areas of ministry in which we are not involved.

C. They Recognized the Grace Given to Paul and Encouraged Him to Press On (2:9)

And finally, they recognized the grace given to Paul and encouraged him to press on.

³ John Maxwell, *The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork* (Thomas Nelson, 2001).

Seeing that Paul had been given the style, gifts, passion, and direction to minister to the Gentiles, the apostles urged him to keep at his divinely appointed task. Paul said in verse 9, **“They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews.”**

We give one another so little affirmation in our various callings and ministries. Christians rarely hear another Christian come alongside and say, “You’re doing a great job! Keep pressing on for Christ!”

In the Iditarod race, dog mushers from around the world annually compete for the prestige of first place in a grueling test of endurance. The famous Iditarod trail begins in Anchorage and concludes 1,100 miles later in Nome. It winds through Alaska’s treacherous passes, over the frozen Yukon River, and along the windswept Bering Sea. In any given year it takes the first-place musher between eight and twenty days to complete the course.

On March 13, 2003, Robert Sorley, a Norwegian fireman, was the first to pass under the famous burl wood arch on Front Street in Nome. Even though it was two o’ clock in the morning and the temperature was below zero, a crowd of some two thousand was on hand to celebrate his accomplishment. Sorley was greeted by the mayor of Nome and the governor of Alaska.

Two hours later an Alaskan musher, Ramey Brooks, crossed the finish line, where the Norwegian champion, Sorley, greeted him and honored his achievement. Several hours later, Jeff King arrived with his team of dogs in third place, and both Sorley and Brooks welcomed him. As fourth place finisher Martin Buser crossed the finish line with his dog-drawn sled, the three previous finishers were on hand to rejoice with him. On and on it continued.

Although it is not mandatory, mushers greet mushers at the end of the 1,000-mile trail as a way of celebrating each person’s achievement. Having already completed their own race, they cheer on those who are about to reach their goal.

The scene of mushers cheering mushers is a beautiful picture of Christians encouraging one another in the race we are running for Christ.

Take time this week to write a note of encouragement to someone. Take time this week to pick up the phone and call someone and encourage her. Take time this week to go out of your way to meet someone to encourage him. Get in touch with your Sunday School teacher and let him know that you appreciate his ministry. Get in touch with your child's Sunday School teacher and thank her for their ministry to your child. Get in touch with your Bible study leaders and thank them for their ministry and encourage them to press on for Jesus Christ and the gospel.

Conclusion

There is only one gospel! And that one and only gospel is a gospel of the grace of God. The *subject* of the gospel is the Lord Jesus Christ. The *content* of the gospel is the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The *reason* for the gospel is that it is the only way for unholy and condemned sinners to be reconciled to a holy and righteous God. And the *terms* of the gospel by which the benefits of Christ's death, burial and resurrection become ours is by faith alone. According to Paul, to add anything to faith, or to subtract anything from faith, as the only means by which sinners can be reconciled to God is to proclaim a different gospel.

What does God require of us? Just as Luther discovered, God simply wants to be *believed*. God wants to be believed when he describes our guilt and condemnation, and he wants to be believed when he unfolds his gracious remedy in the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. May the Holy Spirit enable us to take him at his word, thereby believing unto eternal life.

And then, believing this gospel, let us discover our distinctive contribution in sharing the gospel. Let us learn to affirm others who are laboring in the gospel, especially in ministries different from our own. And let us mutually encourage and support each other to press on in serving Jesus Christ and making the gospel of Jesus Christ known! Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org