

The uniqueness of the gospel Gal 1:1-9

Tim Anderson 2/6/2019

We are beginning a new sermon series today.

It's my aim once a year

to have a sermon series that is a bit more across the church.

So this time, four of our Bible study groups are looking at Galatians and I am preaching it on Sundays at the same time.

If you are not part of one of those four groups,

but you'd like something to read

that will mesh in with the sermon series,

the study book is "Galatians for you" by Tim Keller.

I've got a couple of copies with me this morning.

Paul's letter to the Galatians is marked out in the NT for a couple of reasons.

First of all it's early.

We don't know exactly when the books of the NT were written.

But we have a reasonable idea.

The earliest books were James, Galatians, 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians.

Those four were almost certainly written before the first gospel to be written, Mark.

Now why do I tell you that?

Many people presume, somewhat naturally, that because the gospels are placed first in the NT that they were written first.

But it's not actually true.

Does it matter?

Well not in the sense of being closer in time to Jesus.

Revelation which was written last

is just as authoritative for Christians as these early letters.

But the early letters give us our first window to look at the early church.

And our first window to look at the teaching of the gospel of Jesus.

And make no mistake,

Galatians isn't called a gospel,
but it is all about the gospel.

I said there were a couple of things that mark Galatians out.
It's early, that's the first.

It's feisty, that's the second.

And you don't have to wait until next week to find that out.

Right from the opening of the letter,

Paul gets stuck into them.

Indeed from our modern very polite ways of communicating,
there are times when Galatians makes you take a breath.

That's good.

God sometimes needs to give us a bit of a shock.

Why does Paul write the Galatians a strongly worded letter?

Well the story goes like this.

Paul preached the gospel to the Galatians.

People became Christians there and formed a church.

Now some people who were part of the church in Jerusalem,

Jewish people who had become Christians,

had travelled up to Galatia

and were telling the folks in the church there

that if they wanted to be Christians

they had to obey the Jewish ritual laws.

Their men needed to be circumcised.

They all had to obey the Jewish food laws.

Now Paul hadn't told them they needed to do those things.

So when the Judaisers,

that's the word that is used

for the folks who wanted them to become more Jewish,

when the Judaisers were giving these instructions,

they were running Paul down also.

"Hey this Paul character who explained the gospel to you,

he wasn't actually one of Jesus' disciples.

He never met Jesus.

He actually only became a Christian later,
Years after Jesus' death and resurrection,
and after persecuting Christians for some time.
He doesn't know all of the ins and outs of Christianity."
So that's the story behind the letter.

Which is a good point to get in to it.

1:1 "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,"

Paul always starts his letter with:

"From Paul, to whoever he's writing to."

And he usually adds some description
of himself or the letter's recipients

that's important for the contents of the letter.

And he starts his letter to the Galatians with his apostolic badge.

Why?

Because his credentials had been under attack.

The Judaisers had been undermining his authority in the church.

So he puts out there the reason why he should be listened to.

Paul is an apostle.

But what is an apostle?

The word comes from the word for 'sent'.

An apostle is someone 'sent'.

And in the ancient world,

you could have apostles for various authorities.

The Jewish Sanhedrin appointed apostles
to travel and teach in their name.

But Paul is no human apostle,

he is God's apostle.

He's sent not from men or by a man,

but from Jesus Christ and God the Father.

Note in passing what this means about the deity of Christ.

Not a man - Jesus Christ!

Jesus Christ - God the Son!

But the argument is not about Jesus' deity, it's about Paul's apostleship.
He's not self appointed.

Take note Judaisers, who are self appointed.

He's appointed directly by God.

Any nonsense about Paul not having been one of the disciples
who knew Jesus while he walked the earth
is rendered null and void.

Paul was personally chosen by God.

He didn't ask to be.

In fact he was on his way to persecute Christians
when God grabbed him by the scruff of the neck
and pulled his life in completely another direction.

And because he was chosen by God,
he must be listened to.

If you refuse to listen to Paul,
you are refusing to listen to God.

Paul was personally commissioned for his task as an apostle by God.

Now this is something the church today struggles with
just as the Galatians did.

And Anglican piety hasn't helped.

The practice of standing for the gospel reading
and not for other readings from the Scriptures is frankly unhelpful.

Either we should stand for them all or for none of them.

Galatians is the gospel.

It's a letter about how to be saved by faith in the Lord Jesus
written by an apostle chosen and authorised by the Lord Jesus.

It stands equally with the gospels as God's Word to us.

What is the gospel according to Galatians?

1:3-4 "Grace and Peace to you

from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,

who gave himself up for our sins

to rescue us from the present evil age,
according to the will of our God and Father,
to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."
The gospel is God's grace and peace given to us.
God's kindness that we didn't deserve
making peace between us and him
when we had our hearts hardened against him.
The gospel is Jesus' sacrificial death for our sins.
Not just a wonderful example of self sacrifice,
but absorbing in his own body our punishment.
The gospel rescues us from the present evil age.
If you are a Christian then your citizenship is in heaven.
You remain living on this earth
till you have completed the work God has given you to do.
But right now you belong to another place.
And one day God will call you home.
To your true home.
That's the gospel.

But there's a problem for the Galatians.
They are leaving this gospel and turning to another teaching.
And that's what makes this a feisty letter.
People psychologise Paul's reasons for being feisty.
As if it were all about him protecting his position in the church.
But it's not about that.
It's about the salvation of the Galatians.
That's what's at stake.
Their eternal life.
And so Paul won't treat this
like it's just a difference of opinion
about some obscure theological matter.
This is about whether people go to heaven.
It's no joke.
Listen to him again,
1:6-7 "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."

Who is the one they are deserting?

Who is the one who called them to live in the grace of Christ?

Is he talking about himself,

the one who preached the gospel to them?

No, this is God they are deserting.

God has called them to live in the grace of Christ.

If they embrace a teaching other than the gospel,

then they are turning against God.

Now this raises a difficult question for us.

If these Galatians thought they were Christians,

but by embracing a false teaching

were actually unknowingly deserting God,

is it possible to do that today?

People get edgy about that question,

and for some good reasons.

Protestants killing Catholics and vice versa in Northern Ireland,

religious wars in Europe

that went on for much of the seventeenth century.

It makes you think,

"Let's not get too hung up about doctrine.

Let's just accept people's profession of the Christian faith

and agree to disagree about differences over doctrine.

Heavens, there are enough non Christians in Australia right now,

why worry about trying to convert people who profess believe in Christ

to your particular brand of Christian?"

Well what usually happens when you react strongly against something
is that you swing too far in the opposite direction.

The apostle Paul is absolutely in agreement

that there are doctrinal matters

about which we shouldn't cause an argument.

He deals with that in detail in Romans 14&15.
It's just that the issues facing the Galatian Church
are not in that category.

These guys are not wrangling about trivia,
they are abandoning the gospel.

And while that is not worth starting a war
or a violent sectarian conflict over -

We must avoid doing what they did in Northern Ireland -

But we also must warn people who stray into this kind of false teaching
that they are putting their salvation at risk.

It's about persuasion not violence or coercion.

But we do need to persuade.

If we say nothing and pretend it doesn't matter,
then we are effectively saying to Jesus,

"Your death on the cross was a bit of a waste of time."

Because if the gospel doesn't matter,
then why did Jesus die?

If God could have saved us without Jesus' death,
then he put his only Son whom he loves
through an awful lot of unnecessary suffering.

And if we could be saved by Jesus death
without putting our faith in the gospel message,
then God sent his apostles to their deaths preaching the gospel
for no reason.

You know they were all martyred except John.

Why did they need to give up their lives,
for us to hear and respond to the gospel,
if Jesus' death on its own would save us,
without our responding to him with faith?

So is it possible to embrace a false teaching
and unknowingly abandon God today?

Yes it is, and it's disturbingly common.

What was the basic error the Galatians were falling into?

They were trying to earn their salvation by good works.

Instead of recognising that we are saved by faith alone,
they wanted to add to things that we do
to make ourselves acceptable to God.
They weren't denying that Jesus died on the cross for their sins.
But they were saying,
"Yes Jesus died for my sins,
but in order to be acceptable to God,
here's the part that I have to do.
So that when you add Jesus death and my good works together,
then the result might be good enough for my salvation."
Now the good works the Galatians were trying to add
were the Jewish ritual laws: circumcision and the food laws.
Very few people today are tempted to make those additions.
But lots of people are tempted to add something to Jesus' death -
to specify some good works that are required for salvation.

Well there are many ways of falling into this error.

I'm going to highlight just one.

I think it's the big one in Australia.

It's come up in conversation for me this week.

Here's the distortion of the gospel.

Are you ready?

"It doesn't matter what you believe
so long as you are a good and loving person."

Lots of people out there believe some variation of this.

People outside the church and inside the church.

But this is a false gospel.

It is really no gospel at all.

This is how Paul responds to the preaching of a gospel like this,

1:8-9 "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!

As we have already said, so now I say again:

If anyone is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted,
let them be under God's curse!"

Paul doesn't mince his words.

This kind of message results in destruction.

People who proclaim this kind of message
cause other people to go to their destruction.

Let them be under God's curse!

"It doesn't matter what you believe
so long as you are a good and loving person."

It sounds so very good and tolerant
because it is in keeping with the spirit of this age.

But it's actually intolerant.

Who is it intolerant of?

Bad people.

Under this false gospel only good people can be saved.

But on the cross, Jesus holds out the offer of salvation to bad people.

The thief crucified next to Jesus was a bad person.

Jesus says 'Today you will be with me in paradise'.

And it's particularly silly to be intolerant of bad people.

You know why.

You are a bad person.

I am a bad person.

"There is no one who is righteous not even one,

no one who understands,

no one who seeks God,

all have turned away."

That was Rom 3:10-12.

We are all bad people.

A false gospel that says,

"It doesn't matter what you believe

so long as you are a good and loving person."

would result in the condemnation of every single one of us.

Measured by God's standard of perfection,

none of us are good and loving.

All of us need to respond to the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection.

All of us need forgiveness of sins that can't be earned but only given.

And anyone who leads people away from that message

is leading them to their eternal destruction.

So how should you respond next time you hear someone say,

"It doesn't matter what you believe
so long as you are a good and loving person."

There's no point starting a fight with them.

There's no point saying,

"You are preaching a false gospel,
may you be under God's curse."

That's not likely to be helpful.

Notice that in our reading,

Paul is not addressing the false teachers,

he is addressing those who have been listening to the false teachers.

He can afford to be far more strident

about the damage the false teachers are doing.

Here's what I would say if someone said to me,

"It doesn't matter what you believe
so long as you are a good and loving person."

I'd say,

"I'm so glad that's not true.

If it were true,

then there'd be no hope for me.

I'm not a good and loving person.

I need good news for broken people like me."

I wish I'd said something like that when it was said to me this week.

It presents the fatal flaw of the false gospel of tolerance.

But it does it without being accusing.

It might start a conversation

where you get a chance to explain the gospel.

That would be great.

Is there a time when it's right to go all out
and do the 'Let them be under God's curse' thing?

Yes there is.

It's when vulnerable and impressionable Christians

are being led to their destruction
by those who are in positions of religious authority.
I listened to Archbishop Foley Beach
denounce the false gospel of neo paganism a couple of weeks ago.
What he said was not harsh or judgemental.
He took no pleasure from saying it.
But he needed to say it,
because to say nothing
would be to watch people go to their deaths without warning them.
And that is neither kind nor loving.
He warned people about a false gospel,
not so that he could say,
"I'm right and you're wrong."
No.
The only reason is to direct people to the true life giving gospel.
Here it is in Galatians 1.
1:3-4 "Grace and Peace to you
from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,
who gave himself up for our sins
to rescue us from the present evil age,
according to the will of our God and Father,
to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."