

“Other Gospels”

The Gospel Series, No. 10

Galatians 1:6-10

March 11, 2018

The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

We have said so far that the gospel is the good news of the triumph over sin and death accomplished *for us* by the incarnate Son of God, God the Son who became man so that he might give his life a ransom for many. Last time we considered the very important fact that God wants this news to be spread throughout the world, from Christians to unbelievers, *because he wants all people to be saved*. He desires that people not only hear the good news but that they embrace it for themselves.

This morning we move on to consider the question whether our definition of the good news is exclusive, that is, the gospel as we have defined it precludes any rivals or substitutes, or whether it might be the case that there is other good news for the world to hear. The Bible directly addresses that question.

Text Comment

- v.6 Albrecht Bengel, the 18th century German commentator on the New Testament, whose Latin original is a marvel of compression – no one said more in fewer words than Bengel (I wish modern commentators would follow in his steps!) – says of these opening statements, “Semina sparguntur tractationis”: “the seeds of the treatise are being sown.” Right away we learn what the subject or argument of Paul’s letter will be and right away the reader learns that *Paul was upset!*
- v.8 No matter their credentials, their reputation, no matter their impressive learning – the Devil, after all, disguises himself as an angel of light – damnation is the fate of those who teach and those who embrace teaching that is unfaithful to the good news.

It is striking that Paul would describe what he obviously considers to be deadly false teaching *as a gospel*, as a kind of *good news*. Clearly, he doesn’t actually think it is good news – it is in fact horrible news – but the message was clearly being presented as the real good news. It was piggy-backing on the genuine article, deriving its authority and its attraction from the real good news. There was enough of the good news in it to make it seem good news when, in fact, it was nothing of the kind. Christians are gospelers, good news people, and so any message that is going to appeal to them must be called and must be dressed up as *the good news*. Even purveyors of false gospels must call their message a gospel, if they want Christians to take it seriously. And so here and elsewhere in his letters Paul talks about these alternative gospels. But he also rejects them all in no uncertain terms.

In this case, the false gospel was of Jewish origin. It combined the story of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, which was a thrilling story, with the demand that the ceremonial observances of the ancient Jewish church be continued in the Gentile church. Paul detected in that demand a false principle of salvation, the introduction of the principle of works or achievement or human

merit. These so-called Judaizers, professing Christians as they were, were teaching, as we learn both here in Galatians and in Acts that Gentiles must be circumcised in order to be saved. This, Paul saw, was a frontal assault on the doctrine of salvation by grace and justification by faith. It inserted our works of obedience into the justification equation. As Paul will say repeatedly in the rest of the letter, the good news is that we are justified by faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ *and not by our works of obedience to the Law*. As we read in Galatians 2:21, Paul's argument was that if our righteousness before God were to any degree the product of our own works, our own acts of obedience, our own performance, then salvation is not by grace and Christ died for no purpose. For Paul justification *by faith* was simply another way of saying justification *by Christ* and not by ourselves.

Now the simple lesson I want to draw from this material this morning is that there were, from the very beginning, corruptions of the gospel, the good news. Indeed, from the time of the apostles themselves, it has been the church's principal challenge to preserve pure and inviolate the good news of God's grace and Christ's salvation. Surprisingly, it has proved all too easy to lose the good news! And times without number, this great message of God's intervention on our behalf because of his mighty love has slipped through the fingers of God's people. Here is Martin Luther, writing of the situation some 14 years into the Reformation in Wittenberg. [*LW*, 26, 253]

“By the grace of God we here in Wittenberg have acquired the form of a Christian church. In our midst the Word is purely taught, the sacraments are used properly, there are exhortations and prayers for all social classes; in short, everything is moving along well. But some fanatic could stop this blessed progress of the Gospel in a hurry, and in one moment he could overturn everything that we have built up with the hard work of many years. That is what happened to Paul, the chosen instrument of Christ. With great toil and trouble, he had gained the churches of Galatia; but in a short time after his departure the false apostles overthrew them, as this and all his other epistles testify. So weak and miserable is this present life, and so beset by the snares of Satan, that one fanatic can often destroy and completely undo in a short time what it took faithful ministers the hard labor of many years day and night to build up. We are learning this by bitter experience today, and yet there is nothing we can do about it.”

And, of course, as we well know, there have been through the ages since many other “gospels” that were no gospel at all because they were not the happy, electrifying message that Jesus and his apostles preached as the foundation of the Christian church and as the only hope for the world's salvation: the intervention of God himself, his visitation of this world as a human being, his mighty works to deliver sinners from both the guilt and the power of sin, and to grant them an inheritance in heaven and a transformed life. In the second century, for example, Christian Gnosticism developed as an accommodation of the original Christian message to the prevailing philosophies of the Greco-Roman world. The Christian Gnostics had their so-called *Gospel of Thomas* and *Gospel of Philip*. But these were not accounts of the good news in any recognizable fashion. As one scholar puts it:

“...the Gospel of Thomas should never have been called a gospel, for it has no narrative about the life or death of Jesus, no recounting of miracles, and no prophetic signs. It

simply serves up Jesus the talking head. What Thomas' Jesus really wants to accomplish is to be a facilitator so that persons of discernment who are worthy can know themselves, can look deep within themselves, and can thus save themselves by obtaining esoteric knowledge while engaging in ascetical practices." [Ben Witherington, cited in D. Kelly, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 253]

Not only is the message of the Gospel of Thomas not good news in any reasonable sense of the words, it is actually bad news for half of the human race, since it teaches that in order to be saved women must first become men! Come to think of it, that's bad news for everybody. Imagine a world populated only by men! Yuck!

Not to belabor the point, jump to our own day. There are any number of so-called Christian preachers and, alas, vast numbers of Christians who have been beguiled by them, whose so-called gospel is a message of physical health and material wealth through faith in Jesus Christ. The wealth, of course, is accumulated by the preachers almost entirely, false gospel that this message is. But no one can read the Bible and suppose that Christ promised to make all his disciples wealthy or promised that they would all live long and healthy lives. He didn't; he warned that many of his disciples wouldn't either; hence the martyrs, such as Peter and Paul and a great host of others. A perverse refusal to pay attention to vast tracts of Holy Scripture is required to find the gospel of health and wealth in the Bible.

Or we have liberal Protestantism's gospel, or for that matter the gospel of American civic religion, a message of vague and indeterminate goodwill, of a God who need neither be feared nor loved, who will approve of whatever political, moral, and social positions happen to be taken by modern western folk, would never think to interfere in our own pursuit of fulfillment, and will instead leave us comfortable in societies that almost entirely ignore the teaching of the Bible and the history of salvation that it records. *This so-called good news* has little or nothing to do with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ or his resurrection from the dead – the most astonishing parts of the biblical revelation. It is untroubled by the fact or seriousness of human sin or of men and women's guilt before God. It has no place for the judgment of God that can only be averted by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It is utterly unconcerned with the Lord's solemn teaching about hell. It has everything to do with the approval of our chosen way of life, whatever that way of life may be, and with assuring us that, whatever we want to be or want to do, God will not interfere and surely will not condemn. This is a gospel designed not to awaken you and exhilarate you and propel you to action; this is a gospel to put you fast asleep.

It is this long history of false gospels that are not gospels at all that explains the phenomenon of revival, the renewal of the church's life and faith from time to time throughout her history. A revival, such as has occurred in many parts of the church through the ages, is simply *the rediscovery of the gospel and the power of that good news*. It is always the same gospel, the original gospel, the gospel Jesus taught and his apostles taught that brings this renewal of the church's life. When Whitefield and the Wesleys began preaching the good news, the straightforward message of the New Testament – that Christ had come to save sinners, that he had done so on the cross and by becoming alive out of the grave, and that he summoned us to faith in himself and a life of gratitude for his saving love – the comfortable bishops of the English church were unembarrassed to say that they had never heard such a message in their

life! That is how completely the gospel had been lost, or, better, had been replaced by another gospel that was no gospel at all. For them the gospel was polite English society, comfortable and sure of itself and its own virtue.

Or consider a survey taken some years ago by the Lutheran Brotherhood, a fraternal insurance organization now known as *Thrivent Financial*, that long provided coverage primarily for Lutherans. They had surveyed some 2,200 Lutherans. Remember, Lutherans are folk who, supposedly, were given with their mother's milk the conviction that justification is solely by faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ, his loving sacrifice for sinners. But in this survey 48% of Lutherans "agreed" or "probably agreed" that "people can only be justified – that is, put right with God – by loving others" and 60% agreed that "the main emphasis of the gospel – the good news – is God's rules for right living." [*First Things* (May 1999) 86] I'm sure you'd get similar results in any of the older Protestant denominations in America today. Why on earth would anyone consider a list of rules good news to be shouted from the housetops?

This loss of the gospel, the substitution of other messages for it, is why it has been possible for people who have long thought of themselves as Christians – who indulged for years the assumption that they were the people of God – suddenly to discover the good news in the middle of their lives and to be transformed by the discovery. All of a sudden, the ordinary issues of daily life recede into the background and the mind and heart is dominated by the realities of sin and guilt, God's free grace, his amazing love for sinners, the achievement of the Lord Jesus on the cross and in the resurrection, and the prospect of a transformed life and an inheritance in heaven. These are thrilling things, life-changing things, all-encompassing in their effects. This is the good news and whenever it is encountered by human beings with receptive hearts it creates a powerful effect. It cannot help but do so. Just think about those things! Of course, they must change someone's perspective on life radically and permanently.

But that raises an obvious question. If the good news is so thrilling and so life-changing, if the good news is so compelling that it must profoundly alter one's life root and branch, how does it happen that people have always found it so easy to substitute for it something banal, predictable, uninspiring, and obviously self-serving as have been the countless substitutes for the good news that have been trotted out through the ages?

How does that happen? Why does it happen? Why do so many, even in the Christian church, prefer a false gospel to the true one, a substitute for the real thing? Well there are, no doubt many reasons. Certainly, human pride is a principal reason. The good news requires you to acknowledge your sinfulness and your desperate need for what God alone can give you. That proves too much of an admission for many men and women. Christian Gnosticism in the second and third centuries like Christian liberalism in our time plucked the offense from the gospel. You could maintain your high view of yourself and remain a Christian. You could maintain your comfortable, self-serving attitude toward life and still be a Christian. But remove sin and guilt from the foundation of the gospel, remove our desperate need as the presupposition of the good news, and you are left with nothing deserving of the name. Suddenly the Christian faith is nothing but a message that human life will and must continue as it always has, in selfishness and worldly pride, no light at the end of the tunnel, no resolution to the injustices of human life, and

no promise of eternal life. *What we find in human beings today is all there is or ever will be!* And death remains an unsolved problem! So much for good news!

But another reason why the genuine gospel has so often been replaced by cheap substitutes is that there is no promise in it of what sinful people are usually looking for. They want an uncomplicated life. They want an easy life. They want the comfortable life. But the gospel is not such a promise. They want God to give them what they want not what they need and there is no such promise in the gospel of God.

They want an uncomplicated life. And the gospel not only makes no promise of such a life it actually *introduces* severe complications into our lives! It does that in many ways, too many to consider this morning, but let's think together of one such complication. The gospel is a message of deliverance from sin, both from its guilt and its power. In that way, the gospel places the fact, the ugliness, the corrupting power of sin before us in an entirely more profound and relentless way. Christians must be conscious of their moral failures to a degree far greater than other people. Their salvation is salvation from sin, from the selfish and impure desires of their hearts and from the thoughts, words, and deeds that are displeasing to God. Indeed, because we are now Christians they are also displeasing to us. We must live with, we never escape in this world that nagging, that constant, that depressing sense of moral failure. Because we know what Christ has done for us and why, we cannot, as others, make peace with our sins. We must continue to hate them, to defy them, to kill them as we can, unsuccessful as we may often be. Let's be frank. This fact, that we have been made by the gospel to see sin for what it is and its consequences for what they are, places a burden on us, a heavy burden that a Christian cannot escape.

We are helped to bear it by the knowledge that our sins are forgiven, that God loves us and cares for us, but we are forbidden to allow God's forgiveness to become an excuse to sin. We are helped to bear the burden of our sins by the knowledge that God has freed us from bondage to our sin and that we have in Christ new powers by which to put our sins to death. But though we are making some progress, the progress is slow, fitful, and often discouraging. This is not a burden unbelievers bear in anything like the same way. They may be disappointed with themselves from time to time, but not for the reasons Christian are nor to the extent that we must be. The good news makes sin *the* issue of our lives, *our sin, my own sin!*

How many unbelievers are even aware that the Apostle Paul, one of the founders of apostolic Christianity, one of the heroes of early Christian expansion, one of the mighty intellects of history, a man who literally changed the world, was and remained throughout his Christian life in this world, up to the moment of his martyrdom, thoroughly disgusted with himself because he could not conquer his sins. The things he did not want to do, knew he shouldn't do, he did nevertheless. And the things he wanted to do, knew he ought to do, too often he did not do. He did many good things, many holy things, many noble things, to be sure. In Christ he lived a fabulously valuable life. But he knew how much remained in his heart, in his speech, and his behavior that was displeasing to God; indeed, displeasing to himself! He would have said with Rabbi Duncan, the 19th century Scot, that he had never done a sinless thing in his entire life. He had done good things, righteous things, to be sure, but never sinlessly, never perfectly. There was always something wrong with what he did, always something of his sinful self in it.

So it is that the good news of Christ's victory over sin and death for us inevitably makes us enemies of the sin within ourselves, makes us accusers of ourselves, unable to make peace with who and what we are, and consigned to struggle with our sinful characters every day we live in this world. For his sake we must repudiate our sin and yet so much of it remains within us and so much of it finds expression in what we do and fail to do. No wonder the Lord Jesus should begin his description of the Christian by saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are they who mourn." No wonder Paul, a champion of the good news, should describe the Christian as *sorrowful but always rejoicing*. No wonder G.K. Chesterton should say, "Christianity hasn't been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried!"

And where is the difficulty? In the tension between our aspirations for a sinless life when we are still so sinful; in our only so partially successful struggle to put our sins to death. As great a Christian as Samuel Rutherford was, as splendid a life as he lived, he nevertheless confessed to a friend:

"I thought it had been an easy thing to be a Christian, and that to seek God had been at the next door; but...I find true religion to be a hard task; I find heaven a city hard to be won." [CIV; CLXXX]

And this is true of every believer, everyone and anyone who has truly embraced the good news. Welcome to this fight, this struggle, this burden! Great as that news is, it comes with pain in the nature of the case. It tells us that God is after a perfect life in us but that perfection will come only in fits and in stages. We must aspire to it, struggle to live such a holy life, constantly repent of our failure to do so, but as long as we are in the world we shall live between what we desire to be and what we actually are. Only a beginning can be made in this world; what we long for we shall not find until we are in heaven.

Christians, in their sinful pride, can grow insensitive to this pain because it is their daily experience. But as the great saints have always reminded us, and as the Bible teaches us so clearly, the exquisite pain of the Christian life is *and must be* our failure to live the life we now know is the only life worth living and the life our Savior died to give us. We can begin to look down on one another, somehow forgetting how comprehensive our own moral failures are. We can begin to lose patience with the sins of others, somehow failing to grasp how much patience God must show to us every day of our Christian lives.

Let's be clear about this. The difference is *never* that others sinned and we didn't; that they are moral failures and we aren't; that their conduct is despicable and ours is not. That is *never* the case. The difference is that while we have learned of the moral failures of others, many of our own moral failures we have been able to hide, or, worse, we see only too well their failures but are blind to our own, failures that everyone else can see perfectly clearly but are gracious enough not to mention out loud! Let me tell all of you something that shouldn't be a secret to any of you who have been Christians for any length of time.

If you knew me as well as I know myself; if you knew the things I have done or have failed to do; the things I have said or failed to say; and the things I have thought or failed to think; I say, if you had known all that about me, I wouldn't have become the pastor of this church or

wouldn't have remained in this sacred office! And so it has always been, even with the Christians we have reason greatly to admire. John Newton admitted that there was that *in his life as a Christian* that would have tarnished or undone his reputation were it to have been known. As he put it,

“...I hope to go softly all my days under the remembrance of many things, for which I have as great cause to be abased before [God], as if I had been left to sin grievously in the sight of men.” [“Grace in the Ear” pb. Ed. of his *Letters*, 21]

This is the good news? A life of struggle with sin, of sadness and struggle over failure, of unfulfilled longing? Yes. That is what the good news requires of us in exchange for the promise not only of full and free forgiveness but eventual perfection. But there are many, a great many in this world, who are unwilling to make such an exchange. They want simpler things rather than those higher things and they want them now, not later. And so it is that they are ready, always ready, to embrace any substitute that promises them something now while requiring of them very little. False gospels abound because people shy away from the real thing because it requires them to care for things that are unimportant to them and to rejoice in a victory that matters very little to them.

But for us and for any wise man or woman, the news that I can know God, that I can become like Jesus Christ in the goodness of his life, that I can live a sinless life forever in heaven, I say that news is so wonderful, so thrilling and these gifts are worth so much more than anything and everything I might ever have to suffer or endure that no substitute gospel shall ever have any attraction for us. We want the real thing; nothing else! We want the news that is truly good, however much it may cost us to embrace it, to live it out in our lives until finally we are in heaven with God!