

Introduction

Today is what we refer to as "Kick-off Sunday" or "Fall Start Up." I cannot think of a better way to get things kicked-off than to share in the joy of men and women publicly professing their faith in Jesus Christ through baptism. We are also starting a new series in our preaching and teaching of the word of God. We are going to study our way through one of the earliest if not the earliest of Paul's letters—the one he sent to the Galatians. Last time we took a look at the sermon Paul first preached when he arrived in the region of Galatia, and we noted his emphasis on the work of God. God promised. God chose. God delivered. God gave judges. God gave kings. And at last God gave his Son.

Well, since God gave his Son, he has not ceased to give. Among those gifts given to the church, God has also given apostles. It is the emphasis of Paul from the outset of this letter that he is an apostle by the calling and work of God. And he was sent by divine appointment to the region of Galatia to plant what became churches in Galatia. He and Barnabas made disciples in each city. Each group of disciples constituted a church. They encouraged them to continue in the faith. They warned them of many tribulations. They appointed elders in each church and with prayer and fasting committed them to the Lord. This letter comes in the aftermath of Paul's and Barnabas's departure. We are going focus on the first two verses of the epistle this morning.

[Read text and Pray]

Something that has rather passed out of vogue in the modern day is the art of letter-writing. Back before the internet and before the telephone, for years and years and years the main form of communication over distance was written. Even when the telephone came around, there was something called "a long-distance call." The expense could really add up, so people still wrote a considerable amount of letters. For a time when I was young, my father went to live and work in France. My mom, my sister, and brother, and I waited anxiously to receive his letters.

On the envelope of most correspondence appears two very important pieces of information. There is the name and address of the intended recipient and the name and address of the sender. When we turn to the epistles of the New Testament, these same two pieces of information also generally appear at the outset of the letter. Just like the return address in the top left hand corner of an envelope, the epistles begin with whom the letter is coming from. And then there is the indication of the intended recipient often along with a word of greeting. We notice this is the case here at the beginning of the epistle that we call Galatians. At the outset, we are told from whom the letter comes and to whom the letter is sent. And these two pieces of information are going to be our focus this morning.

Let's first consider . . .

I. From Whom the Letter Came.

A. The epistle comes from a man whose name is Paul. It is a Greek name. And it is not the one by which he is first called when he appears in the New Testament. Paul is first referred to in the book of Acts as Saul. And he was also known by that name. Perhaps Paul was his surname. At any rate, Saul hailed from the city of Tarsus and descended from the tribe of Benjamin. That tribe is the one which gave us the notorious son of a wealthy man named Kish whose name also was Saul, who

became the first king of Israel. So no doubt Saul was a popular name among Benjamites as he was a sort of folk hero for them, even if a disgrace.

Now the early life of Saul of Tarsus in a striking way mirrored the life of the ancient king. King Saul despised and opposed the shepherd from the tribe of Judah. Likewise, Saul of Tarsus despised and opposed Jesus, the good shepherd of his generation, who like David hailed from the tribe of Judah. King Saul pursued David and his men in an attempt to do them harm and eliminate them as a rival to his cause. Likewise, Saul of Tarsus opposed Jesus and pursued his followers. He was a persecutor of the church. He once stood by and approvingly watched as Jewish zealots picked up rocks and pummeled the body of a bold preacher of the gospel named Stephen. Saul's pursuit of the disciples of Jesus took him to cities like Damascus. He was determined to capture and bind anyone professing Christ and bring them back to Jerusalem and put them in prison.

It was on the road to Damascus that the likeness between the two Sauls came to an abrupt end. David confronted King Saul a couple times but there was no lasting effect. However, when Jesus confronted Saul, the Pharisee, the effect was an immediate and revolutionary change. There was a complete alteration in the course of his life which obliterated the likeness of his life to that of King Saul.

It was on the road to Damascus that God had mercy on Saul's soul. Jesus Christ himself intervened and confronted Saul. After this encounter, Saul would never be the same. He did a complete 180. Once an opponent of Jesus, he became his servant. Once an enemy of the message of the cross, he became a preacher of the cross of Christ. Paul is the one who coined these words: "far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." Once he took great pride in his ancestry and in his works, but he came to count it all as rubbish and desire nothing more than to be found in Christ not having a righteousness of his own but that which comes through faith in Christ. He was once a persecutor of the church, but he became a planter of churches. It was a complete change. And along the line, some time after his conversion and at the threshold of his missionary service, he stopped being referred to as Saul and became referred to as Paul. Whether intentional or simply providential, the change in the name by which he was known reflects the change in who he became.

When God gets hold of your life, you will not be the same. There is no greater change in any person's life than when he or she goes from who they are by nature to what they become by grace. It is a change so great you can't hide it. "If any person is in Christ, they are a new creature; the old things passed away, behold new things have come." If you say you have begun to believe in and follow Christ, but there has not been a change, I dare say that you are not truly following Christ. You need to think again. To believe in Christ is to trust him and submit to him as Lord. This is the change that took place in Paul. King Saul never turned to David to be his king, but Saul of Tarsus saw the light and ceased kicking against the goads. He called Jesus his "Lord." This why there was such a change in him. He became a new creature and he was never the same as he had been. And it will happen to you as well if you are truly in Christ.

This is one of the things that baptism is meant to communicate. In union with Christ, we are baptized into his death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. It is a miraculous work of God which turns a hopeless sinner into a hopeful saint—not perfect yet, of course, but on the way—a new heart, a new direction, a new resolve, a new life. Jesus is your Lord and king and things cannot go on as they were.

So this is a fitting point to exhort all professing believers to take stock of the change in you since you believed in Jesus. Like Paul, before you repented and came to believe in Christ, you were at enmity with him, but now he is your Lord. Are you living that way? Is he your pursuit? Are you living like Paul who said, all that was gain to me I count as rubbish? Are you living so that you may know him and the power of his resurrection? Are you living so that you may become like him? Are you living with the joyful realization that you are a new creature in Christ?

B. The name of the man who wrote this epistle is Paul. The office in which he served the Lord was as an Apostle—"Paul, an apostle." His role, his calling, his charge was apostleship. This word is significant. Jesus called twelve men to be his specially devoted disciples. He taught them and they learned from him. But there came a time when he sent them out and gave them supernatural authority. Then they were called apostles. And this indicates the importance of being in the office of apostle appointed by Jesus. It is someone sent out personally by Jesus, endowed by Jesus with authority to be his representative, and to act in his behalf with his authority.

There are apostles (little a) and there are Apostles (capital A). A better English word for apostle with a little a, is missionary. It avoids confusion. In the New Testament there are Apostles with a capital A. They fill a particular office in the early church. They were commissioned personally by Jesus with the authority of Christ himself. According to 2 Corinthians 12, authenticating signs accompanied and verified the claim of true apostleship.

There are no Apostles (capital A) today. Those who were assigned to that office were assigned personally by Christ. They are foundational to the New Testament church. The foundation has been laid with the Apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone. When people designate themselves as capital A Apostles in our day, they make a false claim. It is not a claim you can make for yourself. And it is not a claim that can be made by anyone who has not personally seen Jesus.

Meanwhile, Paul emphatically bears that title. This is his claim to the Galatians. He states why. It is not a title and a role he took for himself. He was chosen by God to be an apostle. Paul points out that his apostleship was NOT from men nor through man. That is human beings had nothing to do with it. It was through Jesus Christ and God the Father. Truly this was a divine appointment.

It was initiated and facilitated by the combination of the Son of God, Jesus, and God the Father together. It was Jesus who confronted and called Saul on the road to Damascus. It was the Lord who spoke to Ananias and said, "he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel."

Paul did not fancy himself a disciple of Jesus. He did not seek to be an apostle. This was not a role he desired for himself. But he was called to it by God, and he could not deny it. Being an apostle means bearing the authority of the one who has done the sending. It was imperative for Paul to do exactly what he was chosen to be and to do. Woe was unto him if he preached not the gospel. It was the Holy Spirit in Antioch who said to the church there, "Set aside for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

There is a compelling factor in Paul's sense of call to be an Apostle and for folks to accept him as such. That compelling factor is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Paul's apostleship came through God the Father, who raised Christ Jesus from the dead. God the Father, who raised Christ Jesus from the dead, is the one who made Paul an Apostle. He who raised Christ Jesus can do

anything he wants to do. The resurrection of Jesus is a sign of assurance that God will judge the world. It is a sign of assurance to believers that Jesus Christ is Lord. The resurrection of Christ is an act of the divine defeat of death for those who believe in Christ. It is an act of such power which demonstrates that God can also take a man so zealously set against Christ, as was Paul, and transform him into an Apostle bearing the authority of the one whose credibility and whose followers he sought to destroy. The resurrection he once denied he now proclaims, and stakes his call upon that very resurrection. For this reason the recipients of this letter should pay full attention. They should stop listening to the false teachers who are questioning Paul's credibility and hear him as though they were listening to God.

This is the way we should give attention to the words of the Apostle as well. The New Testament is just as breathed out by God as the Old. The gospel it clearly sets forth is the one true gospel. It is the gospel of God. It was preached by Jesus. It was carried forth by his Apostles, including the Apostle Paul. And we are going to see Paul must make this case to the Galatians because false teachers have arisen with an adulterated message.

C. His name is Paul. His office is Apostle. And he is surrounded by friends. Paul references all the brothers who are with him. They are also on the sending end of this letter. Paul is not alone. He is not a lunatic out there somewhere whom no one will believe. He is surrounded by friends who share his conviction and affirm his authority. The presence of the brothers supports Paul but it also commends him to others. Brothers and sisters who share our convictions also hold us accountable and encourage our hearts and they are a witness to the world.

We as a church are just such a witness. And what a joy to add more brothers and sisters to our visible group through baptism today. Fellowship is a crucial key for believers in this life. It is especially important for the facing of spiritual combat and for going on the offensive to take the gospel to people outside our circle. We need each other. We recognize that by baptizing not off in seclusion somewhere but right here for all the body to behold and share in.

So now we have considered, whom the letter came from. Ever so briefly, we will mention . . .

II. To Whom the Letter Was Sent.

We talked about Galatia last week. The cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe in southern Galatia seem to be the location of the recipients. Large numbers of Jews and Gentiles responded joyously to the gospel when Paul and Barnabas came, and they began to follow Jesus. However, there was a lot of animosity as well. The raucous Jews were jealous and they treated Paul like he had formerly treated Christ's followers. Life was going to be challenging for these new believers. Paul and Barnabas had said, "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." Contending for the gospel meant risking their lives.

But the thing that stands out to me is that the letter of Paul was sent to churches. There is one great assembly of all believers called the church. But the church universal consists of local churches—local gatherings of believers in Christ. Each local church is an outpost of Christ in the world. The local church is where the work of God is at. Local churches were in the heat of the battle. Paul and Barnabas had established churches and appointed elders in each one. These churches bore the responsibility to preach and teach and preserve the truth and to care for one another in the pursuit of spiritual growth and gospel witness. The elders were to watch over the souls of their sheep. They were to be accountable to one another and spur one another on in lives lived for Christ. They were to add new members as the Lord saved them. They needed the word and they needed guidance for how to do these things. Satan never rests from attacking the local

church from without and from within. These were under doctrinal attack and that is why Paul wrote with such strong emphasis on his authority as an apostle.

As we think about the significance of the local church, we need to turn attention to ourselves. Grace Community Church is one of Christ's local churches. God's Great Commission project is the local church. It is the center of spiritual life and vitality for followers of Jesus. Every Christian should be a member of a local church, under the authority of the God-appointed elders, attending regularly to the health and well-being of that church in participation, prayer, and ministry, using each one their spiritual gifts for the building up of the body.

The local church is where souls are cared for. It is where new believers are baptized to visibly associate with the body of Christ. So as we are privileged to share in the ordinance of baptism today, let us hold fast to the importance of what God has called us to do as a church. And here at the beginning of a new church year, fall start up, I am going to ask you to renew in your hearts your commitment to this local body. It needs you. It needs your prayers. It needs your holiness. It needs your gifts. It needs your commitment to the word of God and the gospel of God. It needs your love. If you are saved, part of what you are saved for is living life in the body. So do not forsake assembling together. And do not plan to do other things when you need to meet with the church. And do not give to other things what God would have you give to support this local church. And do not let a spirit of negativity spoil the joy of this local church. Let all be done for the glory and praise of the one who died for the people who make up this local church! A-men.