

Introduction

One of the hallmarks that reflects the mindset of the day in which we live is a bumper sticker you see on many cars. It uses the emblems of various religions to spell out the word, "coexist." Today's culture consists of people with many differing and opposed points of view. But many walk together under the banner of tolerance. The only thing that our culture agrees is intolerable is intolerance. Claims of exclusivity are seen as intolerant. I have two reactions when I see a car with the sticker. On the one hand, I want to say, "if you are asking that we live at peace despite our differences, that is exactly what I intend to do. We should be able to get along with each other despite our differing convictions." On the other hand, I want to say, "but if you want me to treat your beliefs as equally valid to mine, this will never happen. If that's what you want, you will consider me intolerant. I will represent the one thing with which you will not be willing to coexist."

Is grace the only way to God? Is Jesus the only way to obtain grace? Is faith the only way to be united with Christ so as to be delivered from the wrath of God? Each of us should reply unhesitatingly in the affirmative. But we live in world which at best hesitates and at worst replies in the negative. And that's to be expected. But what is truly disappointing is that the reply of many churches in our day is no different from that of the world. We need the message of Paul in Galatians 1:6-10.

[Read text and Pray]

When Paul and Barnabas were in Galatia, they preached the gospel and many persons came to faith in Christ. The clusters of believers in each city were recognized as churches. Elders were appointed in each one. The disciples were strengthened and encouraged to continue on the faith. They were warned of tribulations to come. Paul and Barnabas then committed these churches to the Lord and returned to the church from which they had been sent. At some point Paul received word, however, that those new churches had been infiltrated by some who were contradicting the gospel he had preached among them and that the churches were enticed by this other version of the "good news."

He sat down to write to those churches, and after his initial greeting, he began breathing fire. That's the way Martin Luther described the words of Paul in our text this morning. Paul's intensity and concern resound in these verses. He is not holding back. He will not hide how he feels. To say he is disappointed falls short. To say he is merely surprised is too mild. The word he used is translated "astonished" here in the ESV. Other translations say, "I marvel;" "I am amazed;" "I am shocked." We might say something like, "I am dumbfounded or stupefied" or "It blows my mind." Paul cannot pretend to be anything other than stunned, appalled, and dismayed at the Galatians. What has taken place there has gripped his heart and is squeezing out of him grave concern and a rebuking response that he hopes will shake these churches to the core. There can be no doubt that Paul wants to seize their attention with the shock of a sudden lightning strike so they will sit up and listen.

Why is he so worked up? Because they are turning from what he preached and taught to another so-called "gospel." Paul is beside himself because the stakes could not be higher. He wants them to realize the grave consequences if they will not come to their senses and return to the truth.

Underlying his exclamation is the fact that there is only one true gospel. Everything contrary to it is misleading misinformation that offers no hope at all. Those who brought this other teaching may be

calling it good news, but their "good news" is bad news because it leads people astray. What we need to see this morning in this text is that Paul is both alarmed and astonished at the turning of the Galatians to another gospel. Here are six points of explanation.

Paul is astonished and alarmed because ...

I. The Galatians Were Turning So Suddenly.

What happened took place quickly. Paul says, "I am astonished that you are SO QUICKLY ... turning to a different gospel."

We believe that Paul is referencing the fact that he had been there in Galatia for that extended period of time. He had strengthened and warned and taught the believers the fundamentals of the gospel. He had urged them to continue IN THE FAITH. With prayer and fasting they had committed them to the Lord. And now, ALREADY, they were being drawn away.

The devil does not waste any time. New believers, those who are young in the faith are incredibly vulnerable to false teaching. Before we are solidly grounded, we can be subject to all kinds of doctrine. How do we know what is right when we hear a new teaching that is opposed to what we had heard before? When I arrived at Clemson University as a freshman, I loved the Lord and I was committed to following Jesus Christ. But I was not well-grounded in the faith. For the first time in my life I encountered all kinds of people who claimed to follow Christ, but I was hearing different messages. Some of various groups were claiming if you didn't belong to their group, you were not right with God and you were not going to heaven. Here and there a group challenged the doctrine of the Trinity. Some said you had to be baptized into their group by one of their ministers in a certain way or you were lost. I was like, "I want to believe the truth whatever it is." So I was in a fog of turmoil for some time. It really ratcheted up my angst when one of my roommates turned out to embrace some of these strange teachings. I was vulnerable. I was distraught.

Embracing the truth but turning from it or turning to question it can happen suddenly. New believers and those who are not well-grounded in the faith are especially vulnerable. There are lots of different messages out there. Therefore, it is necessary to be abundantly clear about the essence of the gospel. We are obligated to be ready to defend and help others defend the truth once for all delivered to the saints. Some people spend their lives going from one heresy to another because they never get grounded in the word. Turning away can happen so fast.

I want to encourage anyone who is questioning the gospel not to hide your doubts and not to hide your questions. If you have questions, if you are unsure about your understanding, please, please, come to me or one of the elders or other mature believers in this fellowship, and let us get you rooted and grounded in the truth. In my case, the church I was brought up in was pretty weak and answers to challenging questions were hard to find. Thankfully, I was able to find other pastors who were willing to take the time to make sure I was grounded in the word. God used them to preserve my soul when I was surrounded by heresies that could have swept me away. One of our fundamental roles as a church is to be a haven of truth and instruction to equip and ground one another and keep one another continuing in the truth.

Paul is astonished and alarmed because ...

II. The Galatians Were Turning from Grace.

He says, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you BY THE GRACE of Christ and are turning to a different gospel." The gospel to which they were turning is a turning away from the calling of grace.

The one true gospel is truly good news because it promises reconciliation with God on the basis of the grace of God rather than upon human effort or merit. Any compromise of the gospel message is going to involve a move away from the grace component. The relief that is afforded by God's gospel is that you are justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law. It is such good news! It is wonderful news not because being justified by works of the law is very, very hard. It is wonderful news because it is impossible for a sinful human being to be justified by works of the law.

The human heart is darkened and every attitude, word, and deed is tainted by the filth of sin. Our best works, our righteousness is like filthy rags before God. There is no justification. There is no salvation for any human being based on law keeping. We are law-breakers. To understand the truth of the gospel is to grasp that even a single instance of breaking the law makes us a law-breaker. But I have broken the law of God so many times I cannot count. So have you. Neither of us could ever do enough good to turn our law-breaking into law-keeping. Ray Comfort explains it like this. You are standing before the judge and you are proven guilty of some crime. You plead with the judge that you may have committed that crime but you promise you won't do it any more. You may argue that "Since he is a good judge, he will surely let you go." But the judge will reply: "You are right about one thing. I am a good judge. And because I am a good judge, I will see that justice is done. I cannot let you go and simply overlook your crimes."

Paul says later in this very letter that by the works of the law no one will be justified. And so it is unthinkable that having understood what it means to find grace with God, you would turn away from the gospel of grace to try to be right with God on the basis of your works!

Brothers and sisters, you cannot be saved with a single iota of confidence in your goodness or your works. If it is not all of grace then it is not salvation at all. Will there be godly works in the life of a saved person? Absolutely! But those works do not save or contribute to salvation in any way. Those works simply flow from the fact that I am not the person I used to be. I am a new creature in Christ created for good works. Those works demonstrate the fact that I have been saved by grace. The grace of God that saves is a grace that transforms. But it is not a grace that can be or needs to be subsidized by your efforts or mine. The only thing I have to contribute to my salvation is my sin. Jesus by grace takes care of everything else!

Paul is astonished and alarmed because ...

III. The Galatians Were Deserting God.

Grace is so interwoven with the gospel of God that if you turn to a different gospel, you are in fact abandoning God himself. Paul's astonishment was that the Galatians were "so quickly deserting HIM who called you by his grace." You cannot turn to another gospel without turning away from God.

Perhaps the Galatians thought that they were just taking a different way to God. After all it seems to be the natural mindset of many to assume that different religions are just different ways to God. They perhaps liked the new teaching they were hearing because it was not as controversial as what Paul had been saying that stirred so many people up. Perhaps they even reasoned that if Paul could hear what they had heard he might adjust his approach and have a better reception. Even more people would undoubtedly come to follow Christ if the gospel could be more palatable to the people. And if more people came, what's not to like about that? God would be even more pleased if more people were being saved wouldn't he?

If that was the Galatians way of reasoning, it would explain part of why Paul made this very point. If you think that you by making a gospel-adjustment have found a new way to get more people

worshiping God, think again because you yourself have deserted God. A rejection of God's true gospel for something that seems more acceptable to the world is a rejection of God himself.

Paul was astonished and alarmed because ...

IV. The Galatians Were Embracing an Illegitimate Gospel.

In a sense the Galatians were turning to another gospel. It was contrary to what Paul had preached to them. But it was heralded as gospel. It was heralded as good news. It was presented as the way to right standing with God. But, declares Paul, there is NOT another gospel; there is only one gospel. What they were hearing and what they were turning to was not gospel at all. It was a DISTORTION of the gospel of Christ. It was a corruption. It was a perversion. A perversion occurs when we take something that God means for good and we use it in ways that dishonor his good gift. What was being added to the gospel of Christ robbed it of its goodness. When good news is bad news is when it is preached as good news but when what was good about it is removed so that nothing good is in effect left.

The point of Paul here is that there is only one true message of good news. If it differs from the one true gospel, it is not gospel at all.

Last week we said that Paul provided a summary of the true gospel there in his salutation. The true gospel is God's grace and God's peace given to sinners through the work of the Son of God according to the will of God. Grace and peace from God given to sinners through the work of Christ for the glory of God. Let me give you another concise statement of the gospel this morning. The gospel is about human salvation. It is a salvation message that answers these three questions: Saved from what? Saved by whom? And Saved how? – Saved from what? Saved by whom? Saved how? –

Saved from what? Wrath—God's righteous and holy wrath due to our sins

Saved by whom? Jesus Christ—righteous life, substitutionary death, victorious resurrection

Saved how? By God's grace through faith in Jesus

Whatever goes contrary to this is a fake, even if it claims to be gospel. And there are plenty of false gospels that abound today. One false gospel denies the evil of human sin and the good of the wrath of God. It could be called the good-people gospel. Its main tenet is that people are basically good. A Lutheran pastor proclaimed this one to me a couple months ago. I replied, "No, people are sinners in need of Jesus." Another false gospel of our age is the good news of self-esteem. The great sin in this gospel is not loving yourself. If you will just love yourself and believe in yourself, you are good to go. A third false gospel of this age is the sincerity gospel. It preaches that what is important is not what you believe. What matters is that you are sincere in your belief. False gospel number four is the Good-way Gospel. According the good-way gospel, Jesus is a good way to God may be even the best way, but not the only way to be right with God. There is also number five, the prosperity gospel. If you love Jesus and have faith, God will make you wealthy and healthy and happy. False gospel number six is the gospel of mental assent. According to this false teaching, if you merely agree in your mind that Jesus is the risen Savior, you can be sure you will go to heaven even if there is no transformation in your life. Finally, we have the gospel of faith AND. This is what was being preached in Galatia. You must believe in Jesus AND do certain things like become a Jew and be circumcised and keep the law, etc. Modern day equivalents are believe AND be baptized this way or that by this person or that.

All of these are false gospels. They distort the true gospel of the grace of God toward sinners through the work of Jesus to be received by faith. Do not be deceived. You may say, "pastor, aren't you being kind of narrow minded?" Well, yes, I am narrow minded on this issue; I am right there with the apostle Paul, and you should be too. There is only one gospel, only for those who are willing to admit they are sinners, by the work of only one savior, and received only by grace and through faith. It is the gospel of God. If you have believed on Jesus according to the one true gospel, you are saved from wrath and have the joyful anticipation of glory with the Lord. If you have yet to believe on Christ, I urge you to turn to him today and trust him alone.

Paul was astonished and alarmed because ...

V. The Judgment for False-Gospel Preachers Is Formidable.

The words we read in verses 8-9 are among the strongest statements of denunciation in the New Testament. Twice the apostle calls for the eternal condemnation of anyone who would preach a false gospel. What comes to my mind is the riveting statement of Jesus when he was denouncing those who would tempt any of his little ones to sin. He said, "whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." Paul is just as stern and emphatic. Let anyone who preaches a false gospel—and attempts to lead astray those who believe in Jesus—Let them be anathema. Let them be eternally condemned. Let them be cast into the depths of hell itself.

To carry the gospel is to be entrusted with the most precious gift heaven has to share. If you mess with it, God will mess with you in a most distressing eternal manner. Prize the gospel and protect it. Keep it pure. Because God has a store of wrath particularly suited to repay the likes of those who distort it and disturb his church with lies masquerading as good news.

Paul was astonished and alarmed because ...

VI. The Galatians Were Questioning Paul's Motivation.

Down in verse 10 Paul turns and asks the Galatians who they think he is trying to please—God or man. It is a rhetorical question. Certainly he is making the strong assertion that his life and his preaching are carried out in the pursuit of pleasing God. Perhaps the false teachers had said Paul did not preach law-keeping so as not to offend the Gentiles. But Paul asserts that if he were trying to be a people-pleaser, he never would have become a follower of Christ.

If you want to please human beings, if you want acclaim, approval, and applause in this world or if you simply want the world to be at peace with you, serving Jesus Christ is not the way to get it. If you are living for that, then you can't be living for Christ. Paul had already spent much of his life living for approval from others. But whatever things were gain to him, he counted them as loss for the sake of following Jesus Christ. You do not preach the one true gospel for public approval.

However, people do compromise the gospel to please people. Many of the distortions of the gospel are in fact the result of attempting to not be so offensive to the world. The Good-people gospel is precisely that. But so is the compromise of adding the Mosaic law. That was a way of appeasing the angry and jealous Jews and trying to stay out of the way of their hostility. The false teachers were surely motivated by the fear of man rather than the fear of God. Like many of the folks in Jesus' day, who would not confess their belief in him, they loved the glory that comes from man rather than the glory that comes from God.

On the contrary, Jesus said, "If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own, but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore, the world hates you." If you love the Lord Jesus and the truth and hold fast to the gospel, prepare to be disliked by the world. Your faithfulness to him will be repugnant to them.

Conclusion

Now I want to bring things together this morning with just a few critical takeaways from this text.

1. There is only one gospel. There is only one way to right standing with God. There is only one way for anyone anywhere to be saved from the wrath of God due our sins. It is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone for the glory of God alone. There are not multiple ways to God and there are not multiple ways to God through Christ Jesus. It is an exclusive gospel. Whatever deviates from the one true gospel is a fake, a phony, a fraud. Those fakes lead their followers and preachers to hell not to heaven.

2. Paul's example of confidence and boldness in the one true gospel is an example to be followed by every Christian. I did not say arrogance. Paul is not arrogant in this text, but he is filled with bold and confident conviction. If one thing is true and everything else is a lie, we need not be timid about saying so. The church and everyone in it—and especially the preachers— must tenaciously uphold the one gospel and decry all others.

Several years ago, a well known American preacher was interviewed by Larry King on CNN. You know who the preacher is. He preaches in a former basketball arena in Houston, Texas. In this interview King pointed out he had interviewed ministers on his program who said that if you don't believe in Christ you are not going to heaven no matter what good you have done. What about him? Was he willing to say the same thing? Osteen sidestepped the question. So King said, "What if you are Jewish or Muslim and you don't accept Christ at all?" Joel replied, "you know, I am very careful about saying who would and wouldn't go to heaven." He then said, "I don't know if they are wrong. ... I spent a lot of time in India with my father and I don't know all about their religion but I know they love God, and I don't know. I've seen their sincerity so I don't know; I don't know. ... It's not my business to say this one is or this one isn't." King pressed him. Osteen said, "This is what I believe but it's just not my way to go around saying, 'you're not going; you're not going.'" Repeatedly he asserted, "I don't know." King said, "What about atheists?" Osteen absolutely refused to say that people, who do not believe in Jesus, even atheists, are lost and going to hell.

I would be willing to say Osteen represents a lot of people who call themselves Christians today. For them Jesus is a way, but they will NOT say he is the ONLY way. They will NOT say faith in Jesus is the only way.

How do you think Paul would have responded to Larry King? I would love to be able to see such an interview as that! I can imagine Paul speaking to King somewhat like he spoke to the Galatian churches. What do you mean, "is there any other way to be right with God except through faith alone in Christ alone?" I am astonished you would even ask such a question! There is no way for a sinner to be right with God but by grace. And there is no way to receive grace but by the work of Christ. And there is no way to be identified with Christ's work but through faith in him! So there. And not only that those say otherwise are on their way to a special place in hell that is reserved for deceivers. They are driven by the desire to be loved by the world and are not pleasing God."

How will you respond if someone asks you, "Do you actually believe that if folks don't believe in Jesus they cannot go to heaven"? Be compassionate. But be clear. And be bold and unflinching.

3. Bear in mind that the exclusive gospel of God is an offense to the culture. Expect a backlash from a world which tolerates anything but a claim of exclusivity. And hold fast to this. A servant of Christ lives to please God not man. And his glory comes not from man but from God. Those who live not to be disliked by the world will receive no more than the applause given by the world. But for those who live to please God, the applause of the world means nothing anyway. If your biggest concern is to be liked by the world, it will not work for you to be a true servant of Christ.