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RADICAL: reaction Galatians 1:1-9

The resurrection of Jesus occurred in 30 AD. Three years later, Jesus appeared to a Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians. Saul (AKA Paul) was converted dramatically and went from being a persecutor of Christians to being the greatest missionary in the history of our faith. Thirteen years later, Paul and Barnabas set out on what we know as their first missionary journey (Acts 13).

They traveled from Syria (Antioch) via Cyprus to the mainland. They visited two towns, Antioch and Iconium, and preached about Jesus. Many people believed, but the Jewish authorities didn't like it and threatened them. So they moved on to the town of Lystra. But while there, a group of Jews who had followed them from Antioch and Iconium, dragged Paul outside the city and stoned him. They left him for dead, but God raised Paul up and sent them on to the town of Derbe where he resumed his preaching.

From there it would have been tempting to head straight home. After all, Paul had nearly been killed for his troubles. He'd done his best—preached the word, performed miracles—and what was the response? Stoning! Who would blame him if they went home? But not Paul. After they finished in Derbe, they turned around and retraced their steps... back to Lystra where they had been attacked, back to Iconium and Antioch from whence his would-be murderers had come. Talk about guts! Can you imagine walking back into town and spotting the men who had hurled rocks at you to kill you? It is one of the most courageous moments in the Bible. Paul was determined to shepherd his new Christian converts, even at the risk of his life.

So what is my point? All these towns: Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe were part of the province of Galatia. I think you would agree with me, Paul had some skin in the game—literally—when it came to the Christian church in Galatia. So when we turn to Paul's letter to the Galatians, that is the group to whom he is writing—the first new Christians in Asia Minor, a place where Paul's preaching ministry resulted in many converts and many miraculous healings, the place where Paul's missionary work almost ended before it began.

All of this makes Paul's letter to the Galatians fascinating. It is the very first of Paul's thirteen letters, probably written about 48 AD... two years after he visited Galatia. And Paul is ticked! When we read Galatians, we are listening as Paul takes these people to the woodshed. He is so hacked off at them for what he has heard is happening. You will not find more emotional language in Paul's letters. In fact, at times he is downright crude. But Paul is impassioned because he is protective of that most precious of treasures: the gospel of Jesus. We are going to study this book together and, if you are diligent, by the time we are done, you will have a better understanding of what the gospel is, what it is not, and the freedom we have as followers of Christ. So let's get started, and I want you to look for the first words that give you a hint that Paul is ticked.

Remember, Paul is writing to a group of churches that mean so much to him, he was willing to risk his life for them; he nearly died under a pile of rocks. So what first hint do we have that Paul is upset? "I am astonished..." I'll bet if you heard those words from your mother, it wasn't because she was proud of you. "I am astonished..." Galatians is the only one of Paul's letters that doesn't start with a commendation. Every other letter brags on its readers for the good things they are doing—for their faithfulness, for the fruit of their ministry—but not Galatians. Paul starts right in lambasting them. "I am astonished!" Astonished at what?

We'll get to that. But let's back up a little bit and set the context. ¹"Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead..." We might tend to skip these opening words as a formality. But what Paul claims here sets the stage for the spanking he will deliver in a moment. What right does he have to chastise them? "I am an apostle," Paul claims. This is significant. In the gospels, the "apostles" are the Twelve—the men Jesus called to follow him, who witnessed his resurrection, who were commissioned to go into the world and make disciples. Apostles were eyewitnesses to the resurrection of Jesus.

So how dare Paul make such a lofty claim for himself? Calling himself an "apostle?" Well, apostle means, literally, "sent one." And Paul goes on to explain what he means: he was sent, personally, by Jesus Christ. On that day on the road to Damascus, Paul was met by the resurrected Jesus. He was knocked down, blinded and chastised by Jesus with the words, "Saul, Saul... why are you persecuting me?" And then, he was sent by Jesus. You might have heard the expression, 12th man? Well, some scholars believe that after the death of Judas, Paul was God's intended twelfth man. The original twelfth man! "I AM an apostle" Paul would say "because I did see the resurrected Jesus. He appeared to me personally on that road and called me to proclaim his gospel."

And right there we come to the most important word in this letter. Gospel. It is a churchy word, I know; one we use a lot. But I'll bet if I asked you to define the word "gospel," many of you would have trouble. What does "gospel" mean? "Good news!" So what is the good news of Jesus? A friend told me about a Facebook

posting by a woman who said that she was “trying to follow the teachings of Jesus and of Buddha.” So, is the Gospel about Jesus, an incredible teacher who, like the Buddha, provides good tips about how to live better lives? Is the gospel a guidebook that helps me be better and make God happier with me?

If I asked you right now to stand up and give me a one-sentence description of the gospel, could you do it? Paul is going to spend the entire book of Galatians defining and defending the gospel and we discover pretty quickly that the gospel is not about what Jesus taught; it is about what Jesus did. Paul makes it clear in verse 4:

“...[He] gave himself 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.” There, right there is the gospel. Jesus, in obedience to the will of the Father, came to earth to give himself as a sacrifice for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age. That’s the gospel. And there is almost nothing in that sentence that our world would agree to or understand:

“...he gave himself...” Notice, it is not about what we have done; it is about what Jesus has done. It is this incredible gift of grace—God offering to us something we do not deserve and cannot earn—his love and forgiveness. “For God so loved the world that he GAVE...”

“...for our sins...” Sin. That’s not a popular concept... the idea that we are sinful, broken people. The world thinks that if we provide better education or greater prosperity that we will become better human beings. The United States provides the greatest education and greatest prosperity in the history of humanity. And yet people are still walking into schools and shooting children. How else can you explain this except for the fact that we are all infected with a disease the Bible calls “sin?”

“...he gave himself for our sins to rescue us...” “We don’t need rescuing, do we? That’s humiliating. We are just fine! We have it all together.” My daughter was the lead lifeguard at Camp Spalding this summer. She watched for kids who were drowning and swam out to rescue them. They didn’t argue with her as she swam them back in. Didn’t say, “I’ve got this. I’m just fine.” They needed someone to rescue them; so do we.

“...he gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age...” Our world doesn’t like the idea of evil. Who says what is evil and what is good? Aren’t these all just culturally-imposed values? The idea that there is an eternal, unchanging standard of right and wrong... is galling to our secular culture. Yet Paul dares to say that their present age was evil. Do we believe that to be any less true today?

You want to know the good news? Here it is in a tidy Galatian nutshell: Jesus gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, and he did it all for the

glory of his Father who sent him to us out of his great love for us. There it is. That's the gospel Paul preached in Galatia. That's the gospel that contained the power to heal the sick and raise Paul from the stone heap. That's the radical gospel that established the first churches in Asia Minor. It was a gospel full of God's grace and love and centered in the news that Jesus Christ had died and risen from the dead to offer forgiveness of sin and eternal life. It was a radical, wonderful, transformational gospel message for which Paul was willing to risk his life.

Now, listen to his next disheartening words: ⁶ "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ."

Why is Paul upset? Why is he astonished at the Galatians? Because, false teachers have slipped in and edited the gospel. "I know Paul said this... but that's not exactly right. Here is what you really need to know if you want to be saved." We don't yet know what that counterfeit gospel is. We will get to that later. We only know that these new teachers claim that their gospel is better, and the converts who had been won by Paul's preaching are deserting. They are running away from the genuine gospel.

What does Paul have to say about that "new gospel?" It's no gospel at all! This "good news" isn't good news; it is bad news. It is misleading and confusing. It is toxic and dangerous. In fact, look at that word "pervert." The Greek word for "pervert" is "meta- strepsai." We have an English word derived from meta-strepsai. Can you hear it? Metastasize. What metastasizes? Cancer! A cancer cell perverts the healthy cells. It takes what is good and changes it to bad. Your own body turns against you. Paul says, "This "new" gospel that you are being taught—which is sending you into confusion—is like a cancer."

Do you see Paul's radical reaction? But that's nothing! ⁸"Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!"

This is a hard verse for me. I have many family members with a Mormon background—a faith filled with wonderful people who don't understand grace. Their salvation is dependent upon carefully following the teachings of Jesus and of Joseph Smith. The harder they work, the greater their salvation. But that is a metastasized gospel from the one Paul taught. And do you know where it came from, supposedly? An angel, Moroni, the one on top of every Mormon temple. Moroni is said to have guided Joseph Smith to the golden tablets which he translated into the Book of Mormon.

I have often wondered how our dear Mormon friends can help but be nervous when they read Paul's strong words here: "If we come to you with a different message—or even if an angel comes claiming a message different from the message of grace I offered to you—don't listen." In fact, Paul gets even more radical. "If such a person brings a perversion of the gospel to you, I want them to be eternally condemned." (Wow! That's radical! And then, he repeats himself.) Just in case you think I'm kidding, let me say it one more time: "If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!" The word for "eternally condemned," is anathema...cut off from God... judged... destroyed.

Radical! The risen Christ appeared to Paul. He presented the good news of the Gospel to be shared with the world...the good news that Jesus has done it all...that he has come to rescue us from our sin and save us from this present evil age. That is a great and radical gospel... and utterly unique. And now, interlopers have snuck in to steal their hope by trading a metastasized perversion of the gospel for the real thing. Their message is going to lead people, not to God's gracious salvation, but to death and destruction. Jesus once taught that any teacher who misleads his disciples, it would be better for him to have a millstone tied around his neck and thrown into the sea than to face the wrath of God for what he has done. Paul simply echoes Jesus. "Anathema!"

Do you think Paul's radical words apply to us, today? Are you kidding? We are stewing in a culture that encourages us to desert and pervert the gospel—if we don't like the demands of the gospel, if we don't like the idea that we are sinful and need saving, if we don't like being a part of a church that tells the truth no matter how politically incorrect it might be—just desert! Run away! We have a new membership class meeting right now and they will join us in a couple weeks. All will stand before us and make promises of obedience to Christ and His church. But in time, a few will desert. It always happens. Because it is too hard or because the world is too enticing, they flee. How about you?

And what of the perverting of the gospel? Are there any voices today trying to tell us that this Jesus stuff is fine but not enough—it's too rigid, too judgmental, too narrow. They are the ones with the Co-Exist bumper stickers. Jesus and Buddha and Krishna and Mohammad and Joseph—all paths lead to the same place. Or even more subtly, the perversion of our culture which tells us that Jesus has a special place in his heart for the upwardly mobile American middle class and that our prosperity is proof that we are his favorites.

What do we do with that? We who understand the grace and truth of the gospel and live in gratitude for it... are we willing to get stirred up in defense of the one true gospel? Are we willing to risk getting a little radical to stand for the good news of Jesus? Today, most of you will sit in front of a TV loving the Seahawks and loathing the 49ers. You will shout and scream and moan and boycott if—God

forbid—the Seahawks lose... because you are passionate for your team. And that's just a game.

When we listen to the voice of Paul to his Galatian friends, we hear a radical reaction from a man who is passionate about the gospel and furious with those who would pervert or desert that gospel. I wonder, when was the last time we allowed ourselves to feel that kind of passion about the gospel in which we claim to believe? I'm not saying we should go out anathematizing everyone we meet. But I am saying that this is a matter of life and death—a matter of eternity—and that Jesus needs more of our people who understand what the gospel is and who are willing to stand for it, no matter what it might cost. I wonder if the Holy Spirit will turn you into that kind of radical?

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
 1. Galatians is the only one of Paul's letters that doesn't start out with a note of praise. Why?
 2. What strong language does Paul use to express his disappointment with the Galatians?
 3. Paul speaks of "deserting" and "perverting" the gospel. What is the gospel, simply, and what is Paul concerned about?
 4. In what way have you tried to be a "man-pleaser" and, in the process, minimized or watered down the gospel?