2-9-25

Galatians 1:11-24

So far in Paul’s letter to the Galatian church, he has strongly given his credentials and then expressed his absolute amazement that they have so quickly accepted a false Gospel that had been brought in by people who taught them salvation by works in addition to faith. Paul let them know the importance of holding to the purity of the Gospel he had presented by saying those who distorted it would face eternal condemnation. By these words, Paul made it clear that he was not trying to win the praise of men, as the Judaizers had said of him.

On the surface, as we read through our verses for today, we can see that Paul is defending the Gospel and himself. He reminds them of his history as a Pharisee and how he had persecuted the church; of how he was zealous for the law of Moses, just as these Judaizers are. But also, of how amazed the true Jewish Christian churches were that he had become a follower of Jesus. Not only a follower, but one who dedicated his life to proclaiming Jesus as Lord.

In verse 11, Paul gives them just a quick note of encouragement: he calls them brethren. He is letting them know that he still associates himself with them in a very close manner. He is not rejecting them; he is rejecting what they have accepted and he desperately wants them to turn away from the lie of salvation by works. Paul loves the people he is writing to; but under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he is coming down pretty hard on them. All of us occasionally need a whack on the side of the head.

But the meat of these first couple of verses is the source of the Gospel that Paul preaches. From a human perspective, it’s not a very good way to gain a following. The Gospel basically begins with: your heart is desperately sick, you practice evil, and you’re under the wrath of God. It goes on to say that you can’t be good enough to be acceptable to God; and the only way to be saved from God’s wrath is to believe in a man who was crucified on a cross as your Lord and Saviour.

How can such a Gospel gain a following; especially as large as Christianity has? The answer is that it is a divine Gospel. It is the way God made for us to receive salvation. And the reason people will accept it is that God the Holy Spirit will give people the ability to understand it; He will lift the vail of sin that covers their eyes; and He will even provide the faith necessary to believe. Now, once a person can see, they still have a decision to make. But they have been given all they need to receive salvation.

So Paul lets them know where the Gospel came from. Very importantly, it was not made up by any human-being; it was not made up by Paul himself. And this is one of the primary reasons that it can’t be tinkered with; the Gospel is God’s design and it is perfect. It must not be added to or taken away from. This is what the Judaizers were doing; and this is what many false teachers do.

Along those same lines, the Bible is God’s word. We are warned more than once against changing it. We don’t get to leave out the parts we don’t like or perhaps go against our current social norms. And changing the Gospel that God has provided is the difference between eternal life and eternal death.

Furthermore, Paul didn’t receive the Gospel from another person. He may have heard it from those he was arresting; but he didn’t receive it. And he certainly didn’t sit down and have someone teach it to him so as to gain understanding. No, Paul had the Gospel revealed to him by Jesus Christ himself. The physical Christ got his attention and taught him the Gospel. Paul received it and faithfully carried out his calling to be an apostle.

When we receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we receive the one, God-ordained way to be justified in His sight. This is why we must be so careful that we don’t allow ourselves to accept even a seemingly minor change. Once we do, it becomes a different Gospel. There are many things in the Bible that we might have slightly different interpretations of; but salvation only by faith in Jesus Christ is clear. It is a precious gift from God, that He even made one way for us to have eternal life.

Next Paul reminds them briefly of his history that they are already aware of. Paul not only followed the law, but he followed the tremendous number of traditions that had been added to the law over the centuries. He was the head of his class; he was an over-achiever. Paul is reminding the Galatians that he would know far more about the law than these Judaizers. That he had been far more zealous than any of them. And even with all that dedication to the law, he preached a Gospel that was without the law. He must have had very good reason to do so.

We are aware of some places in this world like North Korea and China, where groups of Christians gather to worship with the constant possibility of government officials barging in and arresting them. Once arrested they are often jailed or put to death. This is what the Christians faced with Paul. He would be the one to barge into their houses, arrest them, and cast his vote to put them to death.

You know, Paul wasn’t a very good candidate to become a Christian. And that is such an important thing for us to keep in mind. It is so easy for us, in fact it’s our human nature, to judge some people as beyond salvation or not worth saving. Yet our righteous God feels differently. 2 Peter 3:9 says: *The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.* So God does not immediately smite the evil person; giving them a chance to come to salvation. While that might not seem fair at first glance, keep in mind that none of us are righteous before God and under His wrath.

Therein is the call for us to share the Gospel with whomever we can; and to pray for those who are on the pathway to hell. Pray for those tyrannical leaders of other countries; pray for those movie stars who are absolutely hedonistic; pray for that neighbor who is such a jerk. While each person has to make their own decision to accept Christ, God can be very persuasive. Paul had to be blinded and knocked to the ground by a bright light and interrogated by Jesus. God knows how to reach people. But, it is also our responsibility to pray for the lost and there are some things that God has ordained to take place only by prayer.

This brings us to another point Paul makes when he says that God revealed Jesus to him at the time God chose. Conversion does not take place without God. The Holy Spirit works in a person’s life to bring them to Christ. Ephesians 2:8-9 tells us: *For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.* Our minds are so clouded by sin that the Holy Spirit has to reveal Christ to us and even give us the faith to believe. That is why rejecting the Gospel is such a serious sin: it is rejecting the Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 2 also says that we were created for good works that God has prepared for us to do since before we were born. So Paul can claim that God set him apart even from his mother’s womb. And each of us has been set apart, even from our mother’s womb, to do the good works God has planned for us to do. And once we are in Christ, we are able to do them. So keep that in mind as you go through your day and even your life; any good thing you find to do has been ordained for you by God. It is very important that you do it.

Paul goes to great lengths to explain that once he heard from Christ, he didn’t immediately go and check out what he heard with other people; even those who were already apostles ordained by Jesus. All he tells us is that he went to Arabia for a while and then returned to Damascus where he had first encountered Jesus. This all covered a period of three years.

We can only guess what Paul did during those three years, but I’d be willing to bet that he spent a lot of time going through his Old Testament. Paul would have known the law and the prophets and the writings backwards and forwards. But can you imagine what it was like for him to go through it all again with the knowledge of Christ? The purpose of all the sacrifices would have made sense; all the references to the suffering servant would have come to light; the Messianic Psalms of David would have new life and meaning. What a blessing for Paul to have all that knowledge suddenly come together for abundant eternal life rather than bondage to rules that led to death.

Again, Paul makes it clear that he received the Gospel of salvation directly from Christ. Once he did, it appears that he went to God’s word to gain understanding. Only then did he go to Jerusalem to see Peter. Peter would have taught him nothing about the Gospel or the Bible, but he would have been able to tell him what it was like to live with Jesus for three years. Peter could have related stories of Jesus’ kindness and mercy; and his sternness with the religious leaders who should have known better than to simply impose rule upon rule.

And there was certainly nothing wrong with Paul getting to know the other apostles. They all had basically the same calling. The only main difference being that the original twelve were called primarily to the Jews while Paul was called primarily to the Gentiles. It would be like pastors getting together to build relationships and for mutual support.

So what can we gain from this? Jesus doesn’t come to sit down and talk with us. But we do have His word; the Bible. Once we’ve accepted Jesus as Saviour, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit. One of the things He does is give us the ability to recognize that the Bible is the true word of God. Therefore, it has to be our foundation; we measure everything else by what it says. It is what God has chosen to reveal to us and it is exactly what we need to know.

That doesn’t mean that we can’t get help in trying to understand what the Bible is saying. In Acts 8, the deacon Phillip meets an Ethiopian eunuch who is reading from the prophet Isaiah. Phillip asks him if he understands what he is reading and the eunuch replies: *“Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?”* Ever feel that way reading Isaiah?

We listen to sermons and (hopefully) they are based on the Bible and try to give a deeper understanding of what God has for us. We need help understanding things written from the perspective of a culture that existed 2000 years ago and even longer. When I say that, keep in mind that God’s word is living and active. That means it applies equally to our culture and that we can’t simply dismiss anything it says as being only relevant to the culture of the time.

There are also books and commentaries that will help us understand what the Bible has for us. The Holy Spirit gives insight and those insights can be passed on to others. Participating in Bible studies is good for a deeper understanding of God’s word. All these are good; but we must always check these other sources against God’s word itself. Just as Paul eventually spoke with the other apostles, his base was what Jesus told him and what was in the Bible as he had it.

Sort of as an aside, Paul wrote that what he was writing to the Galatians was true; and he did so with an oath. He assured them before God. Oaths at that time were very serious because deity was involved. Paul was making an oath according to the God of the Bible, Yahweh. The Galatians would have understood this because even in pagan cultures, they would swear by their gods. To do so was to invite calamity upon themselves if they didn’t follow through with their oath. The oath Paul wrote would have carried a lot of weight with the Galatian Christians.

Finally, when a big change takes place in a person, others notice. None of us may ever have the impact Paul had since he was so widely known and feared. But when we turn to Jesus, those around us should notice a change. For some it may be bigger than others, but a change none-the-less. Even though most of the people of Judea had no idea what Paul looked like; he had an effect on them in his conversion. People glorified God because of him.

Wouldn’t that be nice. To know that someone was praising God because of you? Doesn’t have to be a whole nation, it could be just one person. But that can happen when we cling to Jesus and His word, and seek to do those good works that God has planned for you.

Prayer

Lord God, thank You for this precious revelation of Yourself. You show us how to have salvation; that it can only come through Jesus Christ. You provide everything we need if only we will accept this amazing gift. You explain the things that are pleasing to You, which in turn, benefit us in this life and in eternity. We understand Your absolute justice; we are awed by Your unmatched mercy.

May Your Holy Spirit give us the constant guidance we need to understand Your word, and to apply it to our lives. Open our eyes so that we may see the good works You have for us to do, so that we don’t miss them; because in them, You are glorified. Help us to understand, that no matter what we are doing in life, we need to do it with You in mind; working as if unto You. Ultimately, all we do when we belong to Christ is unto Him.

We pray Lord that You are glorified through our lives. Once we belong to Christ, it is true that we are His. Our love for Him is shown by following His commands. And again, the good we do in this life is according to what He has ordained; what He has commanded. By Your strength we will be profitable servants and others will glorify Jesus because of us.

We lift these things up to You in Jesus’ name

Amen