

Old Testament: Exodus 20: 3 - 7
Gospel Reading: Matthew 24: 3 - 12
New Testament: Galatians 1: 1 - 12

Please pray with me. And now Lord God may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be pleasing and acceptable in Thy sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I'm just going to repeat that one particular sentence that Paul wrote as it carries enough weight to *be* the entire sermon. Re-read verses 6 - 7. Wow. If ever there were two sentences in scripture to be found that were more specifically relevant to the United States of America in 2022, I challenge any one of y'all to find them for me. Paul would be astonished, as I am astonished, that there are so many who are deserting Jesus and turning to something false that is only glossed over by the thinnest layer of Christianity. I was so distressed, anxious, and depressed by this phenomenon occurring at large within our nation that I read two books to help me try to gain some understanding, found a podcast to do the same, did therapy every other week and started on 5 mg of an antidepressant every day. Pastoral colleagues throughout the United States at large quit the ministry all together and some even took their own lives. This is real. I cannot stress this enough. This is real. We cannot brush it under the rug or offer thoughts and prayers. People have deserted Jesus in favor of something else that has only the thinnest veil of Christianity covering over its falsehoods and false savior.

Let's start out by first recognizing that Paul considered what was happening in Galatia to be just as dire and real as what I see happening in the United States in 2022. Note the abruptness and lack of the usual pleasantries and pomp he starts the letter with. Paul, an apostle. Compare that to his self-introduction in Romans for example, or even either of the letters to the Corinthians. Read Romans 1: 1 - 6; 1 Cor. 1: 1; 2 Cor. 1: 1a. Paul does not seem to feel that he has time for the usual pomp of his self-disclaimer so dire is the situation in the Galatian community regarding this false teaching. Note also that Paul immediately goes into a reminder of the basis of his authority. His apostleship is not granted by humanity in any way, shape, or form. His authority is not from humanity nor through humanity but through Jesus; through God the Father; through the Holy Spirit. He immediately states and reasserts his authority over and against what is being falsely taught to the Galatians that they have fallen under the sway of, much to Paul's dismay. This further suggests the direness of the situation in the Galatian community regarding this false teaching. Note thirdly that Paul gets straight to business. There are no pleasantries or waxing eloquent about how wonderful the community is, like we see in Philippians for example. Read Philippians 1: 3 - 11. None of that here. Just straight to the point; I am astonished

that you are deserting Jesus and turning to a false gospel. It has to be false because there is only one gospel. This too suggests the direness of the situation in the Galatian community.

Let's now expand our understanding of what was happening in Galatia that prompted Paul to write this letter. Galatia was very much a Gentile Christian community; it was not part of the Jewish diaspora. As such, the Gentile converts were not forced or compelled by Paul to obey any of the strictures of Jewish law and customs. This Galatian community was not concerned with sacrificial laws, or purity codes, or circumcision. They understood the grace of God, in Christ Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit and how it manifested in their lives. They were baptized in water and Spirit. The Galatian community had become fully converted followers of the Way. They had faith in the grace of God and lived it out on a daily basis as a response to that grace. At some point in time, whether its folks come directly from Jerusalem or neighboring Jewish diaspora communities is left to the scholars to debate, Judaizers appear in the midst of the Galatian community. Judaizers are those Jews who had been converted to become followers of the Way, disciples of Jesus, and still held to Jewish laws and customs. These Judaizers had successfully begun convincing the Galatians of the necessity of circumcision. (We'll actually end up talking a lot about this throughout our study of the letter because the debate about circumcision is the broader context and Paul talks about it a lot later on in the letter.) The "different gospel" Paul references is the necessity of circumcision and really just that. It wasn't any of the other law codes or customs that they were bringing to the Galatians, it was just circumcision and the Galatians were submitting themselves to the procedure. As such, we are forced to ask ourselves could circumcision really be what has got Paul so distressed and riled up? Is circumcision in and of itself worthy to be called a "different gospel"?

I'll submit to you all that it is indeed not circumcision itself which has Paul riled up but how the Judaizers use circumcision to undercut and negate grace. The reason Paul is so distressed by what is happening in Galatia is that his core understanding of Christ, the grace of God, is under assault. Grace, that which enables restoration to a right relationship with God, that which enables true, permanent and lasting purification before God, is a gift from God. Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, accepting his Messiahship, his Christhood, is the means by which grace from God comes to creation and it is a gift. Human faith is a response to this grace. "Faith is not a way for humans to 'get God on their side.' God is already for them. In faith they change, not he. The experience of trusting always leads to the thorough reshaping of the believer." When we put our faith in rites and rituals, in circumcision, or in *anything* before God and God's grace, we put the cart before the horse; we get it backwards. This is Paul's concern. In putting faith in circumcision *before* the grace of

God which was taught to them, they are subverting the gospel; they are robbing the Christhood of its efficacy. They are trying to earn salvation rather than accepting it. Paul is so distressed because “he perceives how completely his readers have misunderstood the heart of the Christian faith. They are working at the wrong end of the relationship with God - what *they* can do to assure inclusion in God’s family; what *they* can do to cope with the power of the flesh; what *they* can do to fulfill the law. The answer lies at the other end - what *God* has done in Christ and how he has done it.” There is but one gospel, the gospel of grace. There is no gospel of self-salvation.

And this is precisely what has me concerned for the United States of America in 2022. The one true gospel of grace is being subverted and those who have been taught the gospel of grace, those who call themselves Christians because of having received this teaching of grace, are so quickly deserting him who called them in the grace of Christ. This false gospel has no grace in it. It is not about what God has done, it is about what they are doing and trying to accomplish. Dear church, do not fall prey! God is a god of grace. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. Amen.