



**LESSON 1:** "The Nature of the Gospel" **Date:** Aug 24/Sept 7, 2014  
**TEXT:** Galatians 1:1-5

**INTRODUCTION**

**Illustration:** As you know, a fierce battle is raging in our world today—a battle of epic proportions, fought in almost every culture. The two sides unwavering believe in their cause, unashamedly attack their opponent, and untiringly build their arsenal. This is the war between Windows and Apple. These foes have recruited great armies, and their followers belittle the other camp and declare, "No other operating system"! Yes, indeed, such a spirit of elitism has hardly ever been rivaled, for the two parties view their counterpart as completely inferior in every way. This is further highlighted when someone switches sides, for then they are viewed as a dastardly betrayer and almost ostracized. Yes, we love to drink the Apple or Windows kool-aid, and we regard all other flavors as junk.

In Galatians 1:6-9, the key verses of this epistle, Paul writes with an air of elitism when he sharply criticizes the Galatians for "deserting" the gospel he had preached to them and "turning to a different gospel" (i.e., a gospel of works), one that he's not even willing to call "gospel." And, as we might expect, he too has a harsh label for a betrayer—"accursed."

Is this appropriate? Or, in the grand scheme of religious options, is it just as silly as the battle over which operating system is better?

Paul is going to passionately and persuasively support this preliminary punctuated pronouncement. His exposition is thorough, his logic clear, his conclusions rational, and his application relevant. And as he writes, he simply models what Bible-believing Christians have clung to throughout church history—that there is "no other gospel" than the gospel of grace, the good news of freedom in Christ!

Throughout this book, Paul's organization is clear. In 1:1-2:10, he defends the priority of the gospel; in 2:11-4:31, he demonstrates the protection of the gospel in salvation (i.e., freedom in Christ from bondage to sin and the law); and in 5:1-6:18, he describes the privileges of the gospel in sanctification (i.e., freedom in Christ from sin's control and legalistic bondage). Together, this epistle serves as "the definitive statement on the problem of legalism" and a comprehensive treatise on

real freedom in Christ. Indeed, there is "no other gospel"! Apart from grace, there is no "good news"!

As we begin to study Paul's impassioned letter to the Galatian churches, we will first consider the gospel's priority. A brief look at the background of Paul's letter to the Galatians explains why it was such a priority for Paul.

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**Background:**<sup>1</sup> Perhaps you've already noticed from the first several verses that Paul excludes any commendation or praise for this church (cf. Romans 1:8-10; Ephesians 1:15-17; Colossians 1:3-6). For even the immature, immoral, divisive, and worldly Corinthians, Paul offered praise (1 Corinthians 1:4-7), but not for these Galatians! Here's why.

Paul had only recently returned from planting these churches in the first place. Acts 13:14-14:23 records Paul's First Missionary Journey (~AD 46-47), when, set apart by the Holy Spirit, he and Barnabas travelled to the South Galatian area and preached the gospel in several cities. On this mission trip, he experienced a cycle of preaching, seeing fruit among the gentiles (and some Jews), being persecuted by the unbelieving Jews, and fleeing to the next city. These cities were Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, and Paul visited each city two times, for according to Acts 14:21-23, Paul's missionary team "returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed." So, Paul had recently visited these cities twice, evangelizing, discipling, and structuring local churches throughout the area.

We say "recently" for this reason. While some Bible students interpret Paul's trip to Jerusalem in Galatians 2:1-10 as his time at the Jerusalem Council in ~AD 48/49 (Acts 15:1-35), thereby putting the writing of this letter several years after his initial visit to Galatia, several excellent reasons (in our opinion) lead us to conclude that this Council had not yet happened. That being the case, this epistle would have been written during Paul's furlough back in Antioch (cf. Acts 14:26-28) in ~AD 48. So, only a brief span of time would have elapsed since his initial founding of those churches (probably no more than 6 months to a year), which

would explain why he is so saddened and surprised that the believers had “so quickly” deserted the true gospel (Galatians 1:6).

In that short time period, Judaizers (perhaps some of those same Jews who persecuted Paul on his First Missionary Journey) had infiltrated these churches, attacking Paul’s apostolic authority and adding works to faith in Christ. And in so doing, they were emptying the gospel of any “good news.” Yet somehow, they had won a hearing in the very churches Paul had recently planted. How prone we are to deception! How quickly we can be turned from truth to error! How easy it is to “turn away” from grace!

This is why Paul writes this letter, and this is why he skips any commendation. Paul’s concern at the outset of this letter is not to coddle tender emotions and offer empty applause—his priority is to defend the gospel of grace alone! It’s not that he didn’t love these new Galatian believers (cf. 4:19-20), but for their own spiritual safety, his love had to take on a different dynamic. And so, rather than hollowly commending them, he immediately begins to defend his apostleship and reaffirm the true gospel.

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Indeed, the true gospel of grace was Paul’s priority. It didn’t matter than he had just been to Galatia and that the believers there should’ve known better. Paul didn’t allow personal inconveniences or people’s failures to detract him from the priority of ministering grace. Although he did take time to commend the Corinthians, he also had the same priority towards them, as he wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4—

*Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. [emphasis added]*

Yes, **the true gospel of grace must be our priority**—all other religious messages and methods really are inferior. As we examine the first chapter of this letter, we see that Paul communicates this truth by describing three different aspects of the gospel—its nature, its source, and its goal. This lesson will focus on that first aspect—the nature of the gospel—and will do so under three headings.

This letter is written, as it states in verse 1, by “Paul, the apostle.” Now, there is an oxymoron! And anyone who knew Paul’s history understood the unlikeliness of such of title (cf. Galatians 1:23; Acts 9:21, 26).

If anyone knew the bondage of legalism (i.e., trying to earn one’s salvation), it was Paul (Acts 22:3-5; Philippians 3:5-6; Galatians 1:14). Paul had labored under a works-righteousness for years and did so with apparent sincerity, avoiding hypocrisy and simply trying to impress people. His zeal for God was so fervent that he denied the apparent blasphemous claims of Jesus and violently persecuted the early Christians (1 Timothy 1:13).

But now, he was an apostle, not merely a “sent one” (i.e., the literal meaning of “apostle”) like all other believers, but one who had seen the resurrected Christ and was commissioned by the Lord to serve in that official role. As such, he became a vital part of the church’s foundation (Ephesians 2:20).

While Paul alludes to his apostleship in this book to affirm his source of authority and thus strengthen his reproofing message, his personal testimony of salvation and his call to the ministry were a constant reminder to him (and to us) of the power of the gospel.

*I thank Him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because He judged me faithful, appointing me to His service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Timothy 12-17)*

The gospel, by its very nature, is powerful! It is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16), able to provide true righteousness for the legalist and libertine alike (Romans 1:17). It is the power of God for sanctification, for its message of Christ’s love towards us controls us more and more (2 Corinthians 5:14-17). And it is the

power of God for service, for the God who saved us by His grace employs us by His grace to be His ambassadors, channeling that grace to others (2 Corinthians 5:18-21). Own personal testimony, then, like Paul's, is incredible in its evidence of the gospel's power (cf. Ephesians 1:19-2:10).

### THE PROVISION OF THE GOSPEL (vv. 2-3)

In verses 2-3, Paul highlights a second distinguishing characteristic of the true gospel's nature, as he suggests a few of its many provisions.

#### 1. *The gospel provides us with a family (v. 2a)*

Paul writes to the Galatian churches along with "all the brothers who are with me." Paul is most likely writing from Antioch, which served as a home church for much of this busy apostle's ministry. Barnabas had first recruited him to serve at that local church, and in his first year there he enjoyed such fruitful ministry that the disciples came to be called "Christians" or "little Christs," those who were "like Christ" (Acts 11:25-26). Shortly thereafter, the church called upon him to take a love offering to Jerusalem (this trip is referenced in Galatians 2:1-10), where they recruited John Mark (Acts 11:29-30; 12:25). They were then formally sent by the church of Antioch on Paul's First Missionary Journey (Acts 13:1-3), where they were eventually lovingly welcomed home and spent an extended furlough (Acts 14:26-27).

This great missionary and church planter, who is often applauded for his tireless and lonely resolve, knew the blessing of community. He had been welcomed into a home church that knew who he used to be, accepted him for who Christ had made him, and graciously partnered with him in effective ministry. This man had found a community that he belonged to, a body that he was a member of, a local church that he was accountable to—and it must have thrilled him to know that he had finally found a "home."

#### 2. *The gospel provides us with a new focus (v. 2b)*

Along with and as a representative of his church family, Paul writes "to the churches of Galatia." Whereas his own legalistic gospel of works-righteousness had formerly called upon him to persecute such churches, God's gracious revelation to him of the gospel of

grace had transformed his perspective on churches and Christians. They were still his focus—but no longer to stamp out; instead, to strengthen (cf. v. 23).

Paul had been given a mission, a purpose—to make disciples and build up the church—and it happened paradoxically on the very road that was taking him to destroy a church (Acts 9). Oh, he still went to Damascus, but when he got there, the Lord had given him a new focus (cf. Acts 9:18). Instead of beating the Christians, he blessed them; instead of terrorizing them, he preached truth to them (Acts 9:19-22).

From then on, Paul's focus only expanded. Consumed by God's purpose for him—to "carry [Jesus'] name before the Gentiles" (Acts 9:15) and "to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in [Jesus]" (Acts 26:18)—Paul looked farther and farther so that he might preach Christ and plant churches (Romans 15:18-24).

And it was that focus that brought him to Galatia. While the Holy Spirit clearly sent him on his First Missionary Journey to that region (Acts 13:2), it was Paul's own desire to "visit the [churches]...and see how they [were]" that compelled him to return on his Second Missionary Journey (Acts 15:36; 16:5).

Paul's focus is a wonderful example for us. It serves to remind us all of, not only the call to "make disciples" that the Lord has given to each one of us (Matthew 28:19-20), but also of the specific context in which that ministry should be accomplished—the local church. Paul loved the church! And although his formal calling as "apostle to the Gentiles" took him far and wide, he always engaged in gospel ministry through a local church, his goal was always to plant local churches, and his daily burden was for the health of those local churches (2 Corinthians 11:28).

Like Paul, the gospel has provided you and me with a new focus! We used to be God's enemies, hastening for eternal perdition. Now, through faith in the gospel of grace, we have become partners with God in His mission, sharing His focus—the rescue and repairing of souls through the local church. What a blessed provision of the gospel this is!

### 3. ***The gospel provides us with spiritual fullness (v. 3)***

The final provision of the gospel that Paul alludes to is spiritual fullness, summarized in verse 3 with “grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” A legalistic gospel of works-righteousness knows no such provision—it cannot provide grace or peace!

“Grace” is God’s free, undeserved, unmerited favor that grants to us complete forgiveness through Jesus to those who believe the gospel (Romans 3:24; Ephesians 1:7; Titus 3:7). It is further evidenced by God’s strength and enablement (cf. Psalm 84:11; Acts 4:33; 2 Corinthians 9:8; 12:9; Hebrews 4:16). “Peace” is the restoration to and harmony with God as a result of such forgiveness (2 Thessalonians 3:16). It also is a continued state of reality between us and our God (John 14:27; 16:33).

Because our “Lord Jesus [i.e., salvation] Christ [i.e., the Messiah]” paid for our sin by His own death, rendering “God our Father” and no longer our Judge, “grace and peace” are ours, independent of our own working!

Why should the gospel be our priority? Well, what other religious message or practice can provide you with this unending flow of grace and peace from God toward you? None! Indeed, there is “no other gospel”!

## THE PARTICULARS OF THE GOSPEL (vv. 4-5)

In considering the nature of gospel grace, Paul concludes his salutation by outlining its particulars, its details. The specifics of this message of “good news” are thrilling! At least six are discovered here.

### 1. ***Substitution (v. 4)***

Jesus “gave Himself” *in our place*. Someone had to die, and it should have been us—we had amassed a debt of sin and the penalty was clearly death (Romans 6:23). Instead, Jesus died as our substitute in our place, so that we don’t have to.

### 2. ***Sacrifice (v. 4)***

Since He was sinless (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24), Jesus offered Himself to be the sacrifice “for our sins” (or *on our behalf*). As the perfect and eternal Lamb (cf. John 1:29; Isaiah 53; Revelation 5:6-10), His sacrificial death was sufficient to pay the penalty for all sin, appease the wrath of God (i.e., propitiation—cf. 1 John 2:2), and allow for our reconciliation to God (cf. 1 Peter 3:18; Mark 15:37-39).

### 3. ***Success (v. 1)***

God “raised Him from the dead.” This was proof, not only of Jesus’ deity (Romans 1:4), but also of the sufficiency of His payment (1 Corinthians 15:12-57). Isaiah 53:11 says, “As a result of the anguish of His soul, [God] will see it and be satisfied” (NASB). The resurrection gave evidence that the check had cleared, that Christ’s payment for sin had been accepted.

### 4. ***Salvation (v. 4)***

Because He took our place, died for our sin, and rose from the dead, He is able “to deliver us from the present evil age.” His name is Jesus (i.e., “salvation”), “for He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Hebrews 2:14-15 says, “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.”

### 5. ***Sovereignty (v. 4)***

This lavish display of loving and rescuing grace and mercy was “according to the will of our God and Father.” This was sovereign grace, planned, performed, provided, and applied by the Triune God alone. It was “according to the purpose of His will” (Ephesians 1:5) and “according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:11). He has done what He pleased, and “it pleased the Lord to bruise Him” (Isaiah 53:10 KJV) so that we might be justified (Isaiah 53:11). This is what makes grace, grace—God’s saving kindness is totally undeserved, and yet freely offered...and that’s just the way it is because God sovereignly ordained it to be that way. Salvation is a free gift of God’s sovereign grace.

## 6. *Splendor* (v. 5)

The only response, then, to such detailed deliverance is, “To [Him] be the glory forever and ever” (cf. v. 24). The goal of the gospel is the magnification of God (Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14), “that in the coming ages God might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:4).

These particulars are added to and further explained throughout the rest of Scripture—indeed, this “good news” is the message of the Bible:

*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. [Ephesians 2:1-10]*

*But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:4-7)*

Such is the nature of the gospel! It has incalculable power, changing Paul from persecutor to prophet, from blind to seeing; it has immense provision, offering us all a family, a focus, and a spiritual fullness discovered nowhere else; and it has incredible particulars, which can be summarized in the title of C. H. Spurgeon’s autobiography—*All of Grace!*

**Application:** If the gospel is no longer your priority, what happened? If you relate to God now, more on the basis of your performance than His, what caused you to reject grace? I’ve you’ve been overcome with guilt lately as you consider your sinfulness, why have you forgotten the gospel’s sufficiency? If you’ve been living life consumed with yourself and your agenda, how is it that you have taken God’s eternal work on your behalf for granted? If you are “so quickly deserting Him who called you in the grace of Christ,” then it is time for you to put your eyes back on the prize and for you to once again prioritize the gospel. There is “no other gospel”—and if you are clinging to something else, you’ve been troubled and deceived (cf. v. 7)!

To help you prioritize the good news of grace, consider being as autobiographical as Paul is in verse 1 and again later in this passage (vv. 13ff), and testify to yourself and others of the incredible ways in which God has and is powerfully saving you. Be as practical as Paul is and look around you, thanking God for His provision of a family to experience life with, a focus to engage in life with, and a fullness to enjoy life with. And humble yourself with Paul to worship the One who has made all the difference and has revealed to you the particulars of His grace.

## CONCLUSION

A spirit of elitism might be silly in the discussion of operating systems, but not so when it comes to the gospel. The Bible unequivocally declares, “No other gospel” but grace, where true freedom in Christ is found. Apart from grace, there is no “good news”! So, because of the nature of the gospel—its power, its provision, and its particulars—let those of us who have been “called...by the grace of Christ” (v. 6) prioritize that precious message (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:1-4). Yes, “far be it from [us] to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Galatians 6:14).

## FOOTNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the background of Galatians, see the pre-lesson, “The Background of Galatians.”