

Living
by
Grace

How the truth of the gospel frees
us from legalism to live the life
we were meant to live!

Twelve Reflections on the Book
of Galatians

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Living by Grace

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Chapter 1: The News that is Nearly Too Good To Be True

Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead;) And all the brethren which are with me, unto the churches of Galatia: Grace be to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ, Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father: To whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen (Galatians 1:1-5 KJVS).

When reading the Bible, understanding the historical context is important and very helpful. This approach will be useful in studying the book of Galatians. After Paul and Barnabas were commissioned by the Church of Antioch in Acts 13, they went to about four or five cities in the region of modern-day Turkey, then known as Galatia. These were Gentile pagan cities, some with primitive, barbaric cultures under Roman rule at the time Paul and Barnabas arrived there. These Gentile pagans warmly received the gospel message Paul and Barnabas preached. God, working through Paul and Barnabas, baptized them with the same Holy Spirit that He gave the Jewish believers on the day of Pentecost. The Roman proconsul of the region, Sergius Paulus, was one of their first converts. He converted to Christianity following the power struggle between Paul and an influential witch doctor and sorcerer who had great persuasive powers over the proconsul. As a result of the efforts of Paul and Barnabas, these Gentile disciples began to orga-

nize themselves to meet in one another's homes. Churches grew in these cities.

Now, unlike the churches planted in the revival of Acts 2 through Acts 12, this was the first time that people who were 100 percent Gentiles became Jesus's disciples. The revival described in Acts 13–14 brought into the church—for the first time—people who were total pagans! They were idol worshippers. Many of these newly converted Gentiles were quite depraved and immoral. They worshipped Greek gods such as Zeus and Hermes and their Roman counterparts; idols, and other pagan gods! They had no relationship with any of the laws of Moses written in the Jewish scriptures. How could such people dare to call themselves believers or disciples of Jesus?

But Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles and inspired by the Holy Spirit, called them believers and disciples. In Acts 13 and 14, Luke gives eyewitness accounts of how these pagans, having heard the message of Paul and Barnabas, believed in the Lord Jesus and, as a result, were saved. They were disciples. The uncircumcised Gentile pagans were receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit! And all of these things happened without adopting or conforming to any of the laws of Moses. It is hard to imagine today how the mainstream members of the Christian church in Jerusalem and other places—where previously only Jews or Jewish proselytes had been converted—would receive this news. How can a holy God give His Holy Spirit to uncircumcised and unholy perverts and pagan idol worshippers?

Perhaps the best way to appreciate these events is to imagine that you received news that bank robbers opened a branch of your denomination in San Francisco or with gamblers in Las Vegas! Many of us, based on the gospel we hear today—and perhaps preach ourselves—would be scandalized if such a thing happened in our churches. Which leads us to the question: exactly what gospel did Paul and Barnabas preach to these Gentiles? Exactly what did they believe so that the Holy Spirit began to call them disciples? What gospel was Paul referring to when he said,

“...the gospel we have preached unto you,” as he wrote to believers in Galatians 1:8? What gospel produced this great result?

The Holy Spirit, working through Luke, recorded for us a good summary of the exact sermon Paul preached in Antioch of Pisidia, one of the cities of Galatia. It is recorded in Acts 13:16–41:

Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: “Fellow Israelites and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! The God of the people of Israel chose our ancestors; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt; with mighty power he led them out of that country; for about forty years he endured their conduct in the wilderness; and he overthrew seven nations in Canaan, giving their land to his people as their inheritance. All this took about four hundred and fifty years.” After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. Then the people asked for a king, and he gave them Saul son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who ruled forty years. After removing Saul, he made David their king. God testified concerning him: ‘I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.’

“From this man’s descendants, God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised. Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. As John was completing his work, he said: ‘Who do you suppose I am? I am not the one you are looking for. But there is one coming after me whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.’

“Fellow children of Abraham and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him, they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the cross and laid him in

a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.

“We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: “

‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father.’

God raised him from the dead so that he will never be subject to decay. As God has said,

“I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.’ So it is also stated elsewhere: “

‘You will not let your holy one see decay.’

“Now when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his ancestors and his body decayed. But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.

“Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the Law of Moses. Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you:

“Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.”

Paul’s preaching is essentially a story. He gave a historical account of the interaction between God and His people, Israel. He starts off by reminding the people that God chose their ancestors. It was not their ancestors who chose God. God chose them because He loved them, not because they loved Him (Deuteronomy 7:7-8). He then outlines the long, topsy-turvy history of the relationship between God and His people. Paul described how, again and again, God’s chosen people rejected God – and consequently broke His law. It was as if God’s people could not obey Him or do His will, no matter how hard they tried. They constantly broke God’s heart! Yet in all this, God did not reject them or promise them destruction. Instead, he “endured their conduct” and

promised to send them a Savior, a descendant of David, who would do “everything God wanted.” Through this Savior, God’s people would be rescued. In other words, although His people were unjust and deserving of death. He promised to send them a Savior, a King, someone to rescue them from their sins and the terrible effects on their lives. The Savior would do what God wanted!

Paul was preaching this message around AD 45. He says that he came with good news. God has indeed sent that Savior, Deliverer, and King! His name is Jesus of Nazareth! Yes, that traveling Jewish rabbi who was crucified in Jerusalem about fifteen years earlier is the Messiah! Paul declares. Yes, he is the One promised by God! The One who will do “everything God wants” on our behalf! Paul then made a case for how Jesus of Nazareth was indeed that King, Savior, and Deliverer. He mentions several prophecies of the Messiah that Jesus fulfilled. He refers to John the Baptist, whom many of these Jews accepted as a true prophet of God. As John the Baptist was wrapping up his ministry, he prophesied that Jesus was the one who was to come. Paul reminded his audience of the prophecy in Isaiah 53 where Isaiah stated that the servant of the Lord, the Messiah, would be butchered for the sins of humankind, destroyed like a “lamb brought to the slaughter” (53:7). Well, that was exactly what happened to Jesus, Paul said. He pointed out to them how, even though there were no grounds for his condemnation, the Jewish rulers conspired with the Roman rulers to have him crucified! It happened just as it had been prophesied!

Paul then shared the biggest news of all! “God has raised Jesus from the dead!” It was just as David prophesied. Paul reminded them of the prophecy that said God’s servant would not “see decay.” Jesus, he said, had not seen decay; three days after he was buried, God raised him from the dead. Hundreds of eyewitnesses could testify to this—including Barnabas, and Paul himself. Why is this point about Jesus rising from the dead, never to die again, so important? You see, Jews in Paul’s time connected death

to sin. People die because they sin. As Ezekiel prophesied, the soul that sins shall die (Ezekiel 18:20). Therefore, if God indeed raised Jesus from the dead, it meant God accepted Jesus as completely righteous and not deserving of death. Consequently, in line with Jewish law, here is a man who would qualify to be the unblemished Lamb of God, who could be presented in the temple to bear the sins of others and die because of their sins.

Paul makes this point: Jesus indeed is the perfect Lamb of God, by Whom and through Whom God has made the required payment for the sins of all people! Paul was saying to his audience that: *“although our lives have been one of constant sin and rebellion against God, by dying, Jesus tasted the death deserved for every man, and by God raising him from the grave, God made His eternal life available to every man! So that now having ascended into Heaven, His life and His Spirit has been made available to us all forever”* (Acts 13:32–34). Why? God has sent Jesus as that King and Deliverer whom God promised would come and save His people from all evil. Alleluia! *“Be it known unto you all, therefore, that through this man Jesus, you who are full of sin, are declared forgiven”* (13:38–39).

Praise God! In AD 45, Paul announced to these people a gospel—news that was nearly too good to be true! He informed them that, because of what God did through Jesus about fifteen years before, *all their sins*—past, present, and future—have been forgiven! Whether they were moral Jews or immoral pagans, it does not matter! God had done it! God had unilaterally, unconditionally, and supernaturally forgiven them *all* their wrongdoings, without their even asking for it! Think about all those things the law condemned them for. In Jesus, God has declared them “justified”—just as if they never sinned!

Paul declared with all boldness that because of this man Jesus we all are now 100 percent accepted by God! We can receive that same Spirit of God that Jesus had! It does not matter, whoever you may be, whether you are Jew or Gentile, you who were previously rejected because of sin are now *fully* accepted by God. And this is not because of

anything *you* have done; it's 100 percent because of what Jesus did, the One who "has done all things well" (Mark 7:37). This is what Paul refers to as the "grace of God" – what God has done for them, in them, and to them, with no contribution from them! Paul persuades them to believe in the grace of God and to continue in it (Acts 13:43). Note the words "continue in the grace of God" or "live by the grace of God." They will come up again because they are the foundation – the theme – of this book.

Let me summarize the gospel Paul preached to the Galatians. It must be the gospel that we hear, believe, or preach to others. I invite you to reflect on these words: "God has done *everything* required for you to be saved from your sins and all their negative consequences. Therefore, to be saved and enter God's kingdom, all you have to do is to 1) believe in what God has done for you, in you, and to you, with no contribution from you; and 2) to continue living in, and from, what God has done in you, to you, and for you.

In other words, once you believe that God has done everything to save you, you must live every day in the light of the truth of what God has done and how you have been changed as a result—even when no physical or natural evidence says it is so. The second aspect is **obeying the truth** of what God has done, or living according to the truth of the good news of God's grace! As we shall see, it is also the same thing as "walking in the Spirit," "living by faith," or "walking in God's love." This book will help you live in line with this too-good-to-be-true news.

Concluding the story in Acts 13, we see that after Paul preached this sermon in a Jewish synagogue, the next weekend almost the whole city came to hear the word of God. Think about it. Why did this happen? The deep implications of Paul's gospel inspired the people! If Jesus died for the sins of *all* people – past, present, and future – *no one* is excluded any longer from participating in God's kingdom. Before this, *only* the Jews were regarded as God's people because of their adherence to laws Gentiles could not keep or were not interested in keeping. But now, if what Paul

said was true, therefore *everyone* was now eligible to have a relationship with God. I can imagine the conversations people were having in their homes, workplaces, and marketplaces after Paul announced this news. Can you imagine the excitement in the city among men and women who had been burdened with years of servitude in religion? Paul's message unleashed a revival in the city. At the core of his teaching was the message that God's love has been freely extended to *all* humanity. What a radical message!

Have you heard this message—this nearly-too-good-to-be-true news? Have you experienced the excitement that such a message brings? Have you seen yourself wholly and completely forgiven—*already*—of not just the sins you have committed but the ones you are yet to commit? Have you experienced the exhilarating feeling of knowing that *nothing* stands between you and your Father God? Do you know that because of what Jesus did, God no longer counts your sins against you? Today, if you go into eternity without God—hell—it would not be because of lying, cheating, sexual immorality, stealing, or murder. No! None of those sins are being counted against you now because of what Jesus did. Rather it would be for one reason and one reason only—that you did not believe this too-good-to-be-true news and receive the One Whom God sent to ensure that your sins are not counted against you.

That is the good news—not the list of things that you need to do, but the good news of *all* God has done for you in Jesus! It is this message that Paul summarized as he opened his Letter to the Galatians in Galatians 1:3-4: **Jesus gave himself for ALL our sins—he died once to take away ALL our sins for ALL time—and thus deliver us from the evil we deserved—and ALL of this was because God loved us unconditionally.** Do you want to receive the life that Jesus offers? Do you want to get right with God, not by what you do, but *because of what God has done for you*?

Then believe that what you have just heard is true, and say this prayer from your heart:

Father, I confess that I have lived in sin and rebellion against you! I have not served you or worshipped you in Spirit and truth. Even the good works I have done are like filthy rags before you. But I also confess that by His death on the cross, in Jesus you forgave me all my sins because you love me. I also confess that when you raised Him from the dead, you offered me eternal life in Him. And so today, I accept Jesus as my Lord and my Savior. I accept His death and resurrection as the basis of my acceptance with You. I receive forgiveness of all my sins, and I receive the New Life which You have made available to all people. Jesus, come take your rightful place in my life. Come reign in my heart and fill me with Your love and Your life. Restore me, Jesus. Live in me. Love through me. Thank you, Father. I am now saved. Jesus is my Lord. Jesus is my Savior. Thank you, Father God, for forgiving me, saving me, and for giving me eternal life with You. In Jesus's name I pray.

DEEPENING YOUR UNDERSTANDING

What does this all mean?

1. What about the historical setting of the book of Galatians was new to you? What could help you gain a better understanding of the book?
2. Is the description of Paul's presentation of the gospel — i.e., essentially as news or an announcement of a historical event — is fair? Why? Also, why do you think the gospel is not presented more in this manner today?
3. AD 45 marked almost twenty years since the death and resurrection of Jesus and the great commission for the apostles to go into "all nations" and evangelize (Matthew 28:19). Why do you think that the apostles and the early church confined the announcement of the good news to only Jews and Gentile proselytes?

4. How are our views about Christians who are different from us in tribe, background, culture, opinions, or dress styles the same as or different from what occurred in the days of the apostles?

APPLYING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

Now, what do I do?

1. If it is true that Jesus is the King who God promised will come to rescue you and save you because you are unable to save yourself, what implication does that have on how you relate with Jesus?

2. If the gospel is an announcement of what has been done for you, what then must you do for you to benefit from what has been done for you?

3. If the grace of God means what God has done for you through Jesus, is there anything you can do to *undo* what God has done for you? Under what circumstances could what God has done for you be of no value to you?

4. What can you do to “continue in grace,” i.e., continue in what God has done for you through Jesus?



Chapter 2: Jesus Plus Nothing

I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preaches any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed (Galatians 1:6-9, KJVS).

As you read Paul's Letter to the Galatians, one thing that jumps out is how upset Paul seems to be. This is the only letter of Paul in the Bible where he does not give his usual elaborate opening greetings. Neither does he end with his effusive goodbyes. He hardly mentions any names of the brethren or families in the church. Missing are his usual words of thanksgiving, prayers, or personal affections that he would typically lavish on his converts, even when they were involved in some grievous and obnoxious sins. If you recall, Paul said the Corinthians were "called to be saints" (1 Corinthians 1:2). Paul thanked God always for the grace of God over their lives (1:4). even though he would lambaste them later for allowing in their fellowship a man who was in sexual relations with his father's wife (chapter 5)! He would rebuke the lazy Thessalonian brethren who refused to work in the name of being born again (2 Thessalonians 3:10), even though he greeted them by saying that he never ceases to remember their "work of faith, and labor of love,

and patience of hope” (1 Thessalonians 1:3). But you see none of these in Paul’s Letter to the Galatians. Remarkable, as this was the first letter Paul ever wrote—and the first written document by an apostle after the letter written at the end of the Council at Jerusalem.

Why would Paul withhold his usual and typical platitudes and greetings? What was going on with the Galatians that made Paul launch his letter with a massive attack on these brethren and the false teachers who were troubling them? Why would Paul still call believers in Corinth saints of God even though that church was troubled with sexual immorality, idol worship, infighting, and schisms? Yet he uses harsh words, such as “foolish Galatians” and “bewitched Galatians” for the brethren in Galatia.

Would we today call a church where sexual immorality and divisions exist “the house of God”? Conversely, would we call a church where there are strong rules and requirements for being called a Christian “a house of witches”? But this is what Paul essentially did. Paul was very upset with the Galatians because they had allowed some people who were “perverting” the gospel to have sway over their lives. These men of God had come to these newly minted Gentile believers in the region of Galatia and imposed moral rules and regulations to live by, which they got from the portion of our Bible that we today call the Old Testament. They taught these new believers that they had to keep these rules in order to be saved or maintain their salvation. These pastors and teachers, rather than showing them how to “continue in the grace of Christ” as Paul and Barnabas had done, came to this church preaching a different “gospel,” one that, although it started by acknowledging the grace of God to the sinner through the death of Jesus, added other things which believers must do in addition to receiving that grace.

To paraphrase, Paul does not mince words when he says, “...if anyone comes to announce to you a gospel different from what we announced to you, let him be accursed”! We could also use the word *anathema*, which means “cursed with

an irrevocable ecclesiastical curse” (See 1 Corinthians 16:22). In modern language, Paul is saying: “What they are telling you looks like the gospel, but it is **NOT** the gospel; instead it is a perversion, a corruption, a poisonous counterfeit of the true gospel. The false gospel will end up harming and ruining you.” From Paul’s perspective, this was more dangerous to a Christian than sexual immorality, fornication, adultery, idol worship, debauchery, homosexuality, and any other vice that the pagan Christians struggled with. Paul never placed an anathema curse on anyone who practiced those sins, but he did not hesitate to do so to anyone who accepted or promoted this false gospel. What, then, was this other “gospel” being preached and announced to these Galatian Christians? Why did Paul consider it so dangerous? Why did these people succeed in confusing these young Gentile converts? Is that “gospel” still alive in our day? How can we identify this false gospel and be able to avoid it?

Let’s start by recalling what the core of Paul’s gospel was. Paul’s nearly-too-good-to-be-true message is that “God has done *ALL* that is needed for men and women to be saved. Therefore, by simply believing what God has done for you in the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be saved. Now, having been saved, live like one who is saved (“continue in God’s grace”), producing good works expected in the life of someone whom God has saved. We see Paul expound this gospel in many other letters he wrote to the Gentile believers. For example, here is the theme of Romans 12:2: “*Dear brethren, because of what God has done for you, be transformed through the renewing of your mind. Present your bodies as a sacrifice to God. This is the only reasonable and logical way to live if you have received God’s mercies.*” In Ephesians 4:1, he wrote: “*if you have been saved, live worthy of your call.*” In Philippians 2:12, he enjoins believers who listened to his gospel and obeyed his command to believe in it, to now work out the salvation they have received. In all his writings, Paul never said good works are not needed. He only says they are a fruit of who you are, not the root of who you want to be. Good works are the natural outflow of people who continue in God’s grace

by making every effort to live out all the good works God has *already* done in their lives.

However, we are told in Acts 15:1 that “*certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.*” It is important that we get a good picture of what was going on here to fully understand all that Paul said in his Letter to the Galatians. Let me try to paint the picture for you as best as I can. Up until this time, *only* Jews or Jewish proselytes became believers in Jesus. Every single person who was a follower of Jesus was either a Jew who had been living under Mosaic law, a Gentile who had completely converted to Judaism, or a Gentile who had not fully converted but accepted the laws of Moses as the principles to govern their lives. This last group is the people called “devout” in the New Testament. It included men like Cornelius, the Ethiopian Eunuch, and others. The bottom line: Until now, only “circumcised” people had converted to Christianity. So when these Jewish believers heard that “uncircumcised Gentiles,” people who were not committed to keeping the basic rudiments of the Mosaic law—the law God Himself gave to Moses on the mountaintop—were claiming to be Christians, they were aghast! From their logic and thinking, yes, *it is* the sacrifice of Jesus that saves. However, one cannot rule out that God sent Jesus to save them after He saw their commitment, desire, and zeal in trying to do their best to serve Him and to live according to His laws and principles. In other words, salvation by faith in Jesus was almost like God’s reward for the effort, albeit a failed effort; people had tried their best to keep the law. God essentially sends Jesus to help you when your efforts fall short. According to Paul, it was inconceivable that, having been saved by faith in Jesus, that people would abandon it later and invent a method to be saved by their works.

Therefore, from the perspective of these Jewish believers, they were not against Paul’s gospel—not at all! Salvation is still by faith in Jesus alone, they claimed. In fact, they claimed that what they were preaching was exactly the

same gospel as Paul's. If anything, they were just making sure the Galatians got the "full" gospel, not something "watered down," which Paul may have inadvertently done in his desire for converts. So these Jewish believers, in a bid to preserve the purity and holiness of their church, came all the way from Jerusalem, saying to the Galatian Gentile believers: "We are here to present to you something that Paul may have left out from the gospel he preached to you."

According to these Judaizers, while believing in Jesus was a very important step, it was not the only step toward being saved. They told them they had to keep the law, specifically the Mosaic law of circumcision, in addition to believing in the Lord Jesus, or else they **could not** be saved. In other words, their gospel message was: *Faith in what God has done for you in Jesus is necessary, but not sufficient for you to be saved; Yes, believe in the Lord Jesus, but you must live like someone who has believed (keep the laws, do good works – in this case, circumcision), and then you are saved (or remain saved).* In other words, without your effort to keep the law, in this case by being circumcised, you cannot be saved, and your salvation is incomplete.

Part of what made this "gospel" message sound so credible was that these people came from Jerusalem—the headquarters of the church itself—and were probably very influential pastors and leaders who were very close to the apostles Peter and James. In fact, James was the brother of Jesus himself! They also claimed that James sent them. At the time, he was the bishop of the Jerusalem church. Further, as Paul would later allude, they also appeared to denigrate Paul and sowed seeds of doubt in the brethren's hearts regarding the authenticity of Paul's apostleship. They may have pointed out to these Gentile believers that Paul never saw Jesus, so his claim to apostleship was bogus. Also, he had killed Christians. Would God give such an important message to someone like that? Again, all of these seemed compelling and lined up with the gospel they peddled, i.e., *faith in Jesus – while important – was not all that was needed. One's lifestyle was important in receiving that which God had*

done.

With this background, you can, therefore, appreciate why Paul had to make strong statements like “even if it was us or an angel from heaven who comes and preaches another gospel different from the one we preached to you, let that person be cursed.” Paul’s ink is, therefore, dripping with holy anger against these Jewish Christians as he tries to undo the damage these “brethren” have done to the nascent faith of these pagan converts. He calls their message toxic and dangerous. He calls it *bewitchment*. He calls it *walking after the flesh*. He calls it *falling from grace*. He says this message, which looks like the gospel—is *not* the gospel. Why is this an important point for him to make? Because the truth of the gospel is that God does not accept us through Christ plus something we have done; he accepts us by Christ alone. Jesus plus nothing is everything. But Jesus plus something is nothing! 1 John 2:2 tells us: “*And He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.*” The word *propitiation* means “satisfaction.” Jesus satisfies God. To be accepted by God, we too must be satisfied with what satisfies God. Paul countered these false teachers by telling the Galatians that: “*when I presented this message, Peter, James, and John confirmed that this indeed was also what Jesus had told them, too. They added nothing to me!*” (see Galatians 2:6).

Whenever someone tells you that faith in Jesus—plus something you have to do—is what assures, guarantees, or maintains your salvation, you must reject it vehemently! In Galatia, it was faith in Jesus plus circumcision. Later on, as we see in Colossians, they added the keeping of “holy days,” of Sabbaths, abstaining from certain kinds of foods, and so on. In our day, we see it in the form of “faith in Jesus plus your holy living,” and so on. But when believers ask for a definition of holy living, pastors and Bible study leaders rattle off a list of “big sins” which people have not yet been caught in—such as fornication, adultery, homosexuality, and so on. Church leaders forget that, according to James 2:10, if someone keeps the whole law and yet breaks one, he

or she has broken all. In other words, in the eyes of the law, if someone tells a “harmless” white lie, that person is also an adulterer, a fornicator, and a homosexual! Which means if we are saved by faith in Jesus plus our “holy living” – none of us is holy enough to be saved!

Other people in the church have specific expectations on how individuals should style their hair, what type of clothes they wear, or whether clubbing and partying are acceptable. They are also concerned for those who engage in antisocial behavior. For some others, it is whether or not you wear jewelry, or other ornamentation, or the level of your commitment to church activities. I have heard people say that God punishes people with car accidents because they left ministries. Other reasons include not praying that morning, or because they had unforgiveness in their hearts. I too was brought up in a Christian culture that espoused teachings like this. For several years after I got saved, I was taught – and I taught others – that unless a woman covers her hair to pray, God would not hear her prayers. This teaching is foolishness and bewitchment. If it were true that God hears a woman’s prayer when she covers her hair with a scarf, then Muslim women who wear hijab would have the most-answered prayers. God answers our prayers, not by covering our hair, but because of what Jesus did. Like the Judiazers in Galatia, we also proved this doctrine from the Bible. Many of us do not realize that doctrine stated in the Bible does not make that doctrine the gospel that brings salvation. The gospel of God’s grace that brings salvation is the story of what God has done to save me, to heal me, and to bless me – with no contribution from me. All I have to do is believe it to receive it. It is that salvation which produces good works in us and not vice versa.

I was also taught – and I taught others – that women should not wear pants or trousers because it was contrary to the Law of Moses. Again we felt that we were proving this doctrine from the Bible. But again, here’s the problem: if God accepts you because of the type of clothing you wear, then Jesus died in vain. Why would Jesus need to die if all I

needed to do was to dress in a certain way? If that were the case, the best dressed would always have the advantage over those who are not well dressed. Christianity then devolves to the size of our wardrobes rather than the strength of our faith in God! It wasn't until I began to understand the gospel—that it is because of what *God* did that I am saved; not what I did or do—that I dropped many of these false teachings.

Today, we see these false teachings manifest in tithes, offerings, and giving; faithfulness in church attendance, and Christian work and ministry, among others. We must be careful. Whenever—in an effort to encourage people to perform good works—it is preached that a man or woman who does not seem to be keeping the laws of God in the Bible is *not* saved (or more subtly, will not be blessed by God, or will be rejected or abandoned by God), that message is *not* the gospel. Such a gospel is a counterfeit gospel; if you hold onto such beliefs, Paul says, you are “foolish” and “bewitched.” Salvation has *nothing* to do with *anything* we do. We contribute *nothing* to our salvation because we have *nothing* to contribute. All our self-righteousness is as filthy rags! The *only* reason why we are saved, the only reason why God blesses us, and the only reason why God accepts us is that of what Jesus did. Nothing we do or don't do moves God in his attitude toward us. God hears our prayers, welcomes us, accepts us, and blesses us—not because of anything we do, but *because of what Jesus did*. **Jesus plus nothing is everything; Jesus plus something is nothing.** God did not send Jesus to help us in our failed attempts at holiness. No! He sent Jesus because *no one* is ever going to be holy enough.

Today, as you receive this message, let Jesus plus nothing be enough for you and satisfy you; it is enough for God and satisfies God. Let no one, not even an angel from heaven, compel you to do one more thing to add to your faith in what God did through Jesus in order for you to receive and enjoy God's eternal life.

Lay your deadly “doing” down –

*Down at Jesus's feet;
Stand in Him, in Him alone,
Gloriously complete.*

(from the hymn "It is Finished" by James Proctor, 1864)

DEEPENING YOUR UNDERSTANDING

What does this all mean?

1. What is the fundamental difference between the gospel message Paul announced and the gospel message as announced by the Christian Jews from Judea?
2. In what practical, truth-filled ways could we today announce the gospel as the Christian Jews in Paul's day did and not as Paul did? How could we make the gospel a "Jesus plus nothing" endeavor?
3. Paul considered the Christian Jews' gospel as extremely dangerous and used the strongest words to denounce that gospel and those peddling it. What do you think was the reason for this? What makes this version of the gospel so dangerous?
4. Why would the Christian Jews from Judea be genuinely skeptical about the message Paul was peddling?

APPLYING WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

Now, what do I do?

1. Quickly review your understanding of the gospel. Where do you tend to lean toward most of the time? Are you more of a "believe in the Lord Jesus and you are saved; now live like someone who is saved"? Or do you lean more toward "believe in the Lord Jesus.

Now that you believe, make sure you are living right, and then you will be saved or remain saved?"

2. What can you do today to improve or increase what God has done for you through Jesus? Or to ask God to do more for you through Jesus?
3. What can you do today to receive more or increase your experience of what God has done for you through Jesus?
4. What can you do to make sure that *Jesus plus nothing* is the only basis of your acceptance by God?