

Let Freedom Ring: Thoughts On Galatians – Part 4

By: Keith Keyser

“As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed. For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.” Galatians 1:9-10.

When is a gospel not a gospel? According to Galatians the answer is: “When someone tampers with the original gospel given to the apostles by Christ.” Paul declares that the new message being proclaimed by the Judaizers in their midst was a gospel of a fundamentally different type (vv. 6-7.)ⁱ Its proponents apparently referred to it as a “gospel,” yet it was not actually “good news” for it could not deal with man’s sin problem or satisfy the holy God. Instead it was a message tailored to human preferences, calculated to win over spiritually undiscerning and fleshly religionists. It had a veneer of morality and Biblicism, but it was a counterfeit gospel. Pleasing God or pleasing men is the fulcrum on which a true message stands or falls. The genuine gospel enables the Judge of all the earth to righteously forgive, justify, and reconcile sinful people to Himself. False variations on the glad tidings merely enhance the religious reputations and self-righteous pride of deluded, fallen men.

Cursed Preachers

The gravity of preaching a false message of salvation may be surmised by the extreme penalty called for by the apostle: “Let him be accursed.” This strong word is the famed *anathema* which means “...something delivered up to divine wrath, dedicated to destruction and brought under a curse...The controlling thought here is that of the delivering up to the judicial wrath of God of one who ought to be ἀνάθεμα because of his sin.”ⁱⁱ The Old Testament Greek translation, the Septuagint uses this word to render *herem*, a notorious term for devoting something to destruction at God’s instruction (e.g. Achan in Josh. 7:1.) If one of Israel’s cities was guilty of embracing false gods, they were to be accursed and accordingly must be destroyed. Deuteronomy 13:15-17:

Wiping out, you shall wipe out all the inhabitants of that city by slaughter by dagger; with an **anathema**, you shall **anathematize** it, and everything in it. And all of its spoil you shall gather into its streets, and you shall burn with fire the city and all its spoil with its population, before the Lord your God. It shall remain uninhabited forever, never to be rebuilt. Nothing from that which is **anathema** shall stick to your hand so that the Lord may turn from the heat of his anger, and he shall give you mercy and be merciful to you and multiply you, as the Lord swore to your fathers.ⁱⁱⁱ

Obviously, departing from the true gospel is a serious matter! Whether in the Old or New Testament, teaching a false approach to God puts one under the divine curse. This sentence results in the Almighty’s wrath for the accursed one. As Paul says elsewhere: “If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed. O Lord, come!” (1 Cor. 16:22.) Amazingly, the Son of God willingly became a curse so that He might redeem believers from the curse of a

broken law (Gal. 3:13.) There will be no anathema for those who love and receive Him by being born again through faith in His word (Jn. 5:24; Rom. 8:1.)

Lasting Truth That Needs No Improvement

When the apostle speaks of the gospel that they “received,” he employs the aorist tense. Cole points out the word’s nuanced usage: “...while it should not be overstressed, [it] probably conveys something of the thought of the ‘once-for-all’ nature of the faith delivered to the Galatians. Paul preached it; they received it. That was a decisive experience, not a tentative or temporary position, to be outgrown later, as perhaps suggested by the Judaizers.”^{iv} God had not altered His message, for there was nothing that needed to be added to His redemptive work through Christ. When the Lord Jesus said: “It is finished,” it was a completed propitiatory sacrifice. The Father added His a-men in the resurrection and ascension (Acts 2:24, 30-36; Rom. 1:4.) Nothing needed to be added, and certainly nothing could be subtracted from this perfect work.

The Inconvenient Truth

What is Paul trying to accomplish in preaching the gospel? He affirms that he is neither seeking human approval nor popularity. The *English Standard Version* accurately captures the sense of the expression: “For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.” In the past, human opinion loomed large in his thinking. When he says “if I still pleased men” he is doubtless thinking back to his pre-conversion career as an up-and-coming, heresy-hunting rabbi. He was self-righteous, arrogant, confident in his moral rectitude, and in the rightness of his cause. When he met the risen Christ, however, it all changed. He went from self-seeking Saul to Christ-exalting “Paul,” signifying “little.”^v His ministry was not motivated out of a desire for human acclaim, but rather that he might please the Lord who saved him. He was decidedly a bondservant of Christ (v. 10.)

Pleasing men and pleasing God are two diametrically opposed ambitions. If one pleases one it is impossible to please the other. The gospel of Christ demands complete obedience, permitting no rivals. His message is odious to fallen humanity, for it sets aside human merit and effort. It makes a sham of man’s pretended righteousness and religiosity, demanding instead, death and resurrection. The old man is not improved, he is crucified. The old life is not spruced up, it is supplanted by an altogether new resurrected life – that of the Lord Jesus Himself. It has been well-said: “Jesus did not come into this world to make bad people good. He came to make dead people live.”^{vi}

Losing Life In This World To Gain It In The Next

Like the apostles, modern Christians must proclaim the gospel of God’s grace in Christ apart from human notions of religion and pretended spirituality. Preaching the real gospel will set the church at variance with the spirit of the age. Believers will not receive applause in the world; nevertheless, at the judgment seat of Christ they will receive crowns (Phil. 4:1; 2 Tim. 4:8; Jms. 1:12.) Contemporary people seek gospels that will gratify their egos and enhance their reputations. Yet these false paths only lead to spiritual destruction under God’s curse (Prov.

14:12.) Only the gospel that Paul preached may be trusted to transform and eternally save those who receive it.

ⁱ Consider verses 6-7: “I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is *really* not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.” NASB & Mr. Vine’s remarks on the Greek words for “different” & “another”: “Guided by Paul’s usage elsewhere the words may be paraphrased, ‘Unto a gospel which differs so radically from that which I preached to you that it is not another gospel, for it is not a gospel at all.’ This was the explanation of the Judaizers, theirs was a gospel with a difference; and this the reply of the apostle, so great is the difference that what they preach is not a gospel at all. He cannot allow them even the name. He preached salvation by grace through faith, they preached salvation by law through works; the two, he asserts, are incompatible, and must be antagonistic to the end, cp. Romans 11:6.” W.E. Vine, *Collected Writings of W.E. Vine: Galatians*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, electronic edition (Logos.)

ⁱⁱ Johannes Behm, “anathema” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. 1*. Ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley & Gerhard Friedrich. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964. electronic ed. (Logos) p. 354.

ⁱⁱⁱ *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*. Oxford: The University Press, 2009; electronic ed.: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/> Accessed on 9/2/10. Boldface mine.

^{iv} R. Alan Cole, *Galatians: An Introduction & Commentary*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1989, p. 82.

^v James Strong, *The New Strong's Dictionary of Hebrew and Greek Words*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997; electronic ed. (Logos.)

^{vi} Ravi Zacharias, “There Is None Good But God,” from the devotion *A Slice of Infinity*, 3/17/2000; available here: <http://www.rzim.org/resources/read/asliceofinfinity/todaysslice.aspx?aid=9036> Accessed on 9/2/10.