

**A tainted gospel is no gospel at all.**

**Galatians 1:6–9** “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—[7] not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. [8] But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. [9] As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.” (ESV)

Some of you know that I am a big evangelist for Aldi. The grocery store. It is such a peaceful place... and so much of what they offer is exactly what I am looking for! But Aldi is one of these stores that is known for its “off-brand” products.

Each aisle is filled with items that have similar ingredients and even the same presentation as brand-named products. They always seem appealing due to the price (always close to half the others) but when you consume the product there is always something a little off. It’s just not the same.

With some items you can adapt to them, but with others, they don’t end up being worth the savings. I still can’t get my family to prefer Savoritz cheese crackers over Cheez-Its!

The churches in Galatia are becoming like Aldi (in a bad way, making clear there is nothing bad about Aldi!) They appear to be churches believing in the Messiah, clinging to Jesus and his kingdom. The aisles sparkle but what is on the shelves isn’t the real thing.

Due to the arrival of some teachers there are some “off-brand” gospels floating around the churches. And it is causing division, disbelief, and despair among the saints. The church is losing its flavor, the savor of Christ and his grace.

Paul isn’t having it. Where in other letters he commends churches for their faithfulness or steadfastness in trouble. After the brief greeting, the Apostle

begins his correction. His direct language (that we might not catch), calling the church out of the silliness they find themselves.

“I am astonished...” ...that you would subscribe to an imposter gospel, something other than what you first heard, something less in such a way it is no gospel at all.

This trouble has never stopped being an issue in the history of the church. Humanity always gets sideways somehow and there are regular attempts to “adapt” the gospel that corrupts the message of Christ.

It’s why we have had Councils, the Reformation, Denominational realignments... upheavals, awakenings.

**A tainted gospel is no gospel at all.**

From these four verses we come to understand the problem throughout the whole letter. Every challenge is going to be based here, in getting the gospel right.

To that end, we want to know the real thing, beware of the imposters, and think of a remedy.

## **The Gospel**

Paul says it is astonishing how quickly they are deserting God - who called them in the grace of Christ.

“Call” is Paul’s regular word for the way in which the gospel message reaches out powerfully, transforming hearers so that they come to believe it, foolish or even scandalous though it may seem.” N.T. Wright

Maybe it is too foolish, too scandalous, grace is too simple or too good so they have added some earning, necessary obedience to be in the kingdom. For us to understand what they were turning to as they deserted God, we have to start with understanding the real thing.

The gospel of Christ, the one “we preached to you.” So what is it? You might have a definition in mind. But what was it that Paul preached?

These churches were planted when Paul and Barnabas were commissioned and sent out by the church in Antioch.

In Antioch in Pisidia... *Acts 13:23* “God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised.”

**Acts 13:26–32** “Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation. [27] For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him. [28] And though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed. [29] And when they had carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. [30] But God raised him from the dead, [31] and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people. [32] And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers,” (ESV)

The begotten Son of God. The promised One has come and was killed and raised to life. All of the promise of the prophets and psalms are realized in Jesus.

**Acts 13:38–39** “Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that **through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, [39] and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.**” (ESV)

This was the message in the Synagogue but after two weeks, the Jews were jealous of the crowds that had come to hear these apostles and tried to contradict Paul...

**Acts 13:46–47** “And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. [47] For so the Lord has commanded us, saying,

“I have made you a light for the Gentiles,  
that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.” (ESV)

And of course this incites the Gentiles to begin rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord!

They keep on preaching in other towns. They face opposition (Paul will even be stoned) but the church is birthed in these places as they continue to preach the gospel. That Jesus was the Savior, that he gave his life for them and his blood covered them once for all.

Paul won't change his tune.

**Romans 1:16** “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...” (ESV)

**1 Corinthians 15:3–4** “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, [4] that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,” (ESV)

**2 Corinthians 5:21** “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (ESV)

Salvation and righteousness are all the work of Christ - the law couldn't produce it in us, we needed an alien righteousness to make us right before God. The forgiveness of sin and new life then comes to those that believe in Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection for us. There is nothing to earn, only a gift of grace to receive.

This is what forms the church and what it means that Christ is the cornerstone. The unmerited favor of God through Christ.

“There is no middle ground between Christian righteousness and works-righteousness. There is no other alternative to Christian righteousness but works righteousness; if you do not build your confidence on the work of Christ you must build your confidence on your own work.” Martin Luther

One way leads to life, the other to deserting God. Be all about this gospel. We have nothing else to give, no other hope, there is no way of life without this good

news as our basis, our foundation and fullness of faith. Rejoice in this like Gentiles hearing of the gift of salvation for the first time.

There is no other way. The worst of sinners made clean and righteous in Jesus. The unexpected, the unlikely, those in need of rescue, us! Proven by his resurrection.

Grace always goes further than our sensibility... but that is what makes it glorious and different. It is what makes this news good!

How could we ever move off of this truth? In our best moments we can't imagine it, but it is actually a pretty regular thing...

### **The Imposters**

The churches have been confused as to what is required, what is needed to be a Christian. Is there obedience to be accomplished before salvation?

The distinctions can at times be so slight, but they are the difference between life and death.

The gospel has implications, ways to live in response to the grace of Christ (care of neighbor, justice, integrity, sacrifice, sin to battle). The gospel isn't against effort but it is opposed to earning. That's the problem here.

There are "some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ." They are saying grace isn't enough, you must believe in Jesus and also keep the law. In this case, Gentile believers can't be real Christians if they don't embrace ceremonial law, circumcision. Doing the opposite of what the gospel does, dividing Gentile and Jewish believers and slowing the advance of the Kingdom.

"...any Jews in Galatia who would come to believe that Jesus was indeed Israel's Messiah would not be expecting that gentiles could join them with no conditions except their faith itself. They could not have foreseen the social and cultural challenges that would then come their way. And when people came from Jerusalem saying "that crazy fellow Paul is destroying Torah! He is causing Israel to sin! He's a people pleaser! He's the kind of false teacher that Deuteronomy 13 warned us about!" Then the local Jewish Christians may indeed have thought the

best thing to do was to persuade their gentile friends to get circumcised. That would keep the neighbors happy; it would allay any suspicion from the Civic authority; it would please the people from Jerusalem. But Paul's comment is stark: this is a non-gospel. It has nothing to do with the genuine "good news."  
Wright

This is not just a slightly different approach, this is dangerous.

"Any revision to the gospel reverses it." Tim Keller

We might think this is only a Galatian problem, but the church is still prone to this trouble.

"From what we know of the Galatians' own experience, apostasy comes over us when two things happen to us. First, we experience soul-trouble - a personal crisis, hardship, tragedy, or loss. And secondly, we encounter twisted-truth - some subtle perversion of the truth of Scripture, a slight distortion of the grace of God in the gospel." Todd Wilson

Ways to preach or latch onto another gospel: grace plus something.

Usually with the right sounding language, what we assume should be Christian activity - "real Christians would do this..." A legalism creeping into the church. You must achieve this thing (get cleaned up, stop cursing, stop drinking, vote the right way, wear your hair a certain way, submit to men in this way...) before you can be saved. Saved through your work.

Maybe it is a rescripting of truth... "humanity is generally good and not in need of saving but just in need of a good example..."

Perhaps it is the charging of indulgences... buying our way out of judgment. Or counting on the grace only as a nudge over the top when we can't get there fully ourselves, "Do my best and grace will do the rest." But grace after you have done your best is no grace at all.

The loss of the pure grace of the gospel is a radical problem. So much so that Paul is calling down a curse on those that teach a false gospel. "If we or an angel from

heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.”

[Serving my parents meatless burgers - “Smells so good! No complaints. Maybe they could tell something was off, but they didn’t want to say anything and just went along. Only after the fact are they willing to curse me!]

It is exactly what happens when we submit to a tainted gospel. We go along... ‘look at how many people are here, it feels right,’ and the longer we consume it the less likely we are to notice the difference. We end up believing lies and adding requirements to salvation, to the grace of Christ. Subtly and slowly. And we end up deserting God who calls us in this grace.

“The devil sometimes uses apparently small, subtle issues to distance us from the gospel, without our even perceiving it.” John Calvin

"False teaching can take root in anyone, as is seen in Paul’s rebuke of Peter and Barnabas (2:11–14). The truth of the gospel is not determined by the identity of the one who preaches but by the content of the message." GTB

"A Christian may not struggle with believing that our good behavior is required to initially earn God's favor; but I haven't met one Christian who doesn't struggle daily with believing - somehow, someway - that our good behavior is required to keep God's favor."

We need to be quick to hunt the imposters in our own hearts and in the communities we find ourselves in.

**Galatians 6:1** “Brothers and sisters, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.” (ESV)

This is a call to pursue people: to restore anyone who has been overtaken in any sin, whether it’s the sin of lying or the sin of apostasy itself; to plead, to warn, to point that person back to Christ and back to grace.

This is why we preach the good news of Jesus, salvation all by grace through faith. We don’t for one second want to preach a non-gospel.

“A difference in your understanding of doctrine leads to a difference in your understanding of who Jesus is - and means it’s questionable whether you really know him at all.” Keller

We try to improve the gospel, only in the end to find we've abandoned it for an idol made by human hands.

This is the Galatian danger.

So how do we avoid it? How do we come back to the grace of Christ?

### **The Remedy**

In his book, *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell introduces the concept and power of "thin-slicing". ... practice and controlled thinking to the point when you know you can trust your instincts or not. How professionals discover counterfeits, money and art. But you can only make those quick decisions based on patterns when you know the real thing.

The remedy to the Galatian danger is being more acquainted with the gospel of Christ. Not merely as a way to be saved but the way that salvation is applied through all of life.

"Unless we come to see and embrace the fact that the gospel never loses its importance in the practical outworking of the Christian life, we'll continue to undercut and cheapen the gospel's impact."

Our rescue by Jesus is not just a one-time-deal but an ongoing dependence on his grace for everything we face, for shaping our hopes, recasting our desires, and carrying us through. And this is a key value for us, we should do nothing that isn't centered on our Savior, his work for us, his grace toward us.

Norman Rockwell, a classic American painter of the last century who was so accomplished in the way he would capture portraits of American life. My favorite painting of his however is “Lift Up Thine Eyes.”



The crowd carries on, looking down, distracted, maybe studying their feet to make sure they are keeping pace. But whatever it is they are focusing on, they are not lifting their eyes to see the grace of Christ.

Like never seeing the Milky Way...

Charles Spurgeon “Six years ago to-day, as near as possible at this very hour of the day, I was “in the gall of bitterness and in the bonds of iniquity,” but had yet, by divine grace, been led to feel the bitterness of that bondage, and to cry out by reason of the soreness of its slavery. Seeking rest, and finding none, I stepped within the house of God, and sat there, afraid to look upward, lest I should be utterly cut off, and lest his fierce wrath should consume me. The minister rose in his pulpit, and, as I have done this morning, read this text, “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.” (Isa. 45:22) I looked that moment; the grace of faith was vouchsafed to me in the self-same instant; and now I think I can say with truth,

"Ere since by faith I saw the stream  
His flowing wounds supply,  
Redeeming love has been my theme,  
And shall be till I die."

Spurgeon lived to keep looking and we live by looking to Jesus.

**Hebrews 12:1–2** “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, [2] looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (ESV)

The church that keeps her eyes on Jesus and cherishes his grace will flourish.

We will find our satisfaction in the God who calls us in the grace of Christ. And we will find his faithfulness more real than any tainted gospel.

**1 Peter 1:3–5** “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope

through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, [4] to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, [5] who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." (ESV)

**Jude 24–25** "Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, [25] to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen." (ESV)

### **A tainted gospel is no gospel at all.**

There is much uniqueness in the Kingdom. There are many expressions of Christianity. But there is only one gospel. There is no place for "off-brand" gospels.

So fill your lives with the good news of Jesus that there is no room in your heart or community for anything beyond the grace of Christ. It is where life is, where the glory of God is...

May we find ourselves always in this grace, proclaiming this gospel to the glory of God.