

January 21, 2007

“Galatians: A Letter Worth Reading” Galatians 1:1-5

FCF: Our casual attitude towards the Scripture

PROPOSITION: (magnet) Because of the nature of Scripture,
(anchor) we must give ourselves to it in study and life.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

This morning we are embarking on a voyage – a voyage that will take us to places previously unseen or perhaps “seen again for the first time.” For the next few months, we’re going to be in a series of studies through Paul’s Letter to the Galatians. “Why Galatians?” you ask. Because of its theme – the rich and free grace of God – and its effects on our lives. John Piper has said that one can no more examine this letter without any effect than you could take a live coal into your hands without being burned.

He’s right. Galatians has that effect. Wherever the message of this book has been grasped, revival has come – hearts melted and lit aflame, lives given to Christ and radically changed. I need that. And my guess is that no few of you here do too.

SCRIPTURE READING: Galatians 1:1-5

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Treasure of unusual value can be found in surprising places. Perhaps you heard the report. This past New Year’s Eve, an Arkansas man found a 2.37-carat white diamond while searching in Arkansas’ *Crater of Diamonds State Park*. Gary Dunlap will get to keep his pricey gem because the park’s policy allows tourists to search for gems and keep anything they find. Dunlap named the rock “Star of Thelma” in honor of his wife. Not bad. Perhaps some of us will be adjusting our vacation plans accordingly.

Treasure of unusual value can be found in surprising places. Beyond unusual – even inestimable. Such is what we have in the Scriptures – a treasure of inestimable value worth our dogged pursuit and our diligent study. Certainly that is the case here.

Before we go any further, let me give you some background. In Acts 13 and 14, we read that Paul and Barnabas were sent from Antioch on an evangelistic mission into the Roman province of Galatia, an area we know today as south-central Turkey. Shortly after their return to Antioch, controversy broke out over the insistence of some Jewish Christians that Gentile converts had to be circumcised in order to be saved. That is, they said Gentile Christians would have to live as practicing Jews. The turmoil was such that it led to what is called “the Jerusalem Council” which we read about in Acts 15. Likely, the letter before us was written in the midst of this controversy, prior to the Council.

The importance of the issue is reflected in the introduction to the letter. The common formula in the ancient world, reflected in the New Testament letters, had three elements – the author, the audience, and a greeting. These elements could be amplified in some way, depending on the circumstance. That amplification is telling here. It gives us an insight into Paul’s concern. And, more than that, we see something of the things we should be tuning our ears to as we unearth this treasure and give ourselves to what it says.

I. CONSIDERING THE AUTHOR

Consider the first element, the introduction of the author (**READ Galatians 1:1-2a**). This is easily the most thorough description of Paul’s calling in these introductions.

A) His Personal History

Consider first the personal history of this man we now know as “Paul.”

1. Who he had been

Who had he been? Let's let him speak for himself (**READ Acts 26:4-11**).

2. Who he became

But Paul goes on and describes a new chapter in his life and how that came about (**READ Acts 26:12-18**). The persecutor of the church had become a servant of Christ.

B) *His Divine Calling*

But more than that, he had been made an "apostle." Here we move from personal history to divine calling. The term is vital to understand. In the ancient world, an apostle was "one who had been sent, a commissioned messenger." Such is what we have here.

1. The source

But who had commissioned him? Paul makes it clear it was the Lord Jesus Himself. Apparently, there were those who had said otherwise and so Paul sets the record straight. He has been set apart for this task – united with "all the brothers" in the message they proclaimed but distinguished from them in the authority he bore. Why is this important?

2. The implication

Because the authority of the person commissioned was that of the one who commissioned them. So when Paul speaks as Christ's apostle, he does so with Christ's authority. That is all the more important given the issue on which Paul takes his stand. He was not merely being defensive. Yes, his opponents were making a personal attack but they were doing so with an agenda. They were devaluing the messenger to discount his message.

And so Paul, as an apostle of Christ, stood firm for the gospel of Christ.

Illustration:

Think in terms of ambassadors today. The Secretary of State goes overseas to meet with leaders of other nations, communicating the position of the United States on a particular issue, in a sense representing the United States on that issue. The chief difference here being that Christ, in the power and mercy of His rule, communicates these things infallibly through His apostles in the deposit of the Scriptures. With no mistakes. No missteps or remarks needing to be retracted. This is His Word through them.

Application:

And the way this introduction is written is intended to amplify that point. Paul is Christ's apostle, His mouthpiece. We are not free to regard him as a gifted theologian but fallible teacher. We are not free to exalt our opinions over his or claim our authority is greater than his by rejecting what he has to say. As John Stott notes of the apostles (**READ quote**), "*For their opinions and authority are Christ's. If we would bow to His authority, we must therefore bow to theirs.*" Which means that the words here are due our riveted attention and humility – not "just as if Jesus was speaking" through them but precisely because Jesus is speaking them. All of which is to say this is worth our study.

II. CONSIDERING THE AUDIENCE

But another reason this letter is worth our study is not just because of the author but because of the audience (**READ Galatians 1:1-2**). Now what's interesting here is how little Paul says regarding his audience – much less than in the other introductions.

A) *Their Own Story*

Well, what do we know about this audience? Consider their story.

1. The events of the first missionary journey

What we know we glean especially from Acts 13 and 14 – the account of the first missionary journey I mentioned earlier. To them, Paul had preached this beautiful gospel. Before them, Paul had lived it out in the face of great opposition and persecution.

2. The events since

And many were glad for what they heard. But not all (**READ Acts 13:44-45, 48-50; 14:1-2**). And it would seem this struggle continued on after Paul left – pressure to reject the message completely from those on the outside and pressure to water it down by those who hadn't embraced its full implications on the inside. Hence, this letter.

B) *Their Own Calling*

Such was their story. Yet we see something of their calling here as well.

1. What was to be

How does Paul describe them? (**READ Galatians 1:2b**) “*The churches, congregations, the assembly, the gathering*” – those called out by God in His grace for His glory. That's who they were – called out, sent out to be salt and light, a city on a hill, living lives radically changed and being changed by the message and power of God's radical grace.

2. What was

That's who they were. But that's not how they were living. And so Paul writes.

He writes words that were likely hard to hear and surely hard to write.

Illustration:

Call it “tough love.” Call it a love that is honestly toughest on the lover, a love that reflects its tenacious unyielding strength, a love not conditioned on pleasant feelings but grounded in deep commitment for another's best. A love thus willing to be tough.

Application:

Again, the way this introduction is worded and the terseness of the address to the audience seems intended to bring this across from the very beginning of the letter. It likely could not have been missed. Now what do we do with this? We can say, “Well, that gives us a model as to how we must love one another.” And it does. But more than anything else, the toughness of Paul's love for the Galatians shows us the toughness of God's love for us – especially on the issue of our understanding and embracing His grace. He makes it clear that He not only despises the proud but despises our pride. And He loves us enough to tell us. He loves us enough to cut the legs out from underneath all the other things we think we can find hope and strength and meaning and purpose in. Such is His love. And that's good news! And that makes this letter all the more worth studying.

III. CONSIDERING THE ISSUE

But then, in addition to what we see of the author and the audience that should pique our interest, we have the issue itself – the gospel. Both God's grace and glory.

A) *Grace to Us*

What, after all, is the gospel? We see it here (**READ Galatians 1:3-4**).

1. Christ died for our sins

Christ “gave Himself for our sins.” He died on our behalf – not simply as a grand display of His love or an example of great heroism but as an actual sacrifice for our sin.

2. Christ died to rescue us from this present age

Why? For what purpose? “To deliver us from the present evil age.” Not to pluck us out and up to a cloud but to rescue us, to free us from a state in which sin and rebellion against God – all that is evil – is found irresistible and we find ourselves bound to it.

3. Christ died according to God's will

And was this an accident, merely some horrible tragedy? Hardly. Again, we are told Christ “gave Himself up” and it was all “according to the will of God our Father.” This was something planned from eternity and brought about at a particular time and place.

B) Glory to God

This is God's grace to us. And it is all to His glory (**READ Galatians 1:3-5**).

1. Nothing to us

We deserved none of this. In fact, we deserve far worse. We deserve none of this nor did we do any of this. We are not initiators here. We are passive receiving beneficiaries.

2. All to Him

We deserved none of it. We did none of it. And so all the credit, the glory, goes to God.

All of it. In truth and, hopefully and rightfully, in our hearts as well.

Illustration:

It's not like the televised award shows the networks continually inflict upon us where the winner stands with the shiny trinket in hand and spats on and on about how "I'd like to thank *blah, blah, blah*" while all the while deep down they're thinking about how none of those peons would be anywhere without them. This is no feigned glory.

Application:

This is the sort of glory that goes like this (**READ "The Doxology"**):

Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow;

Praise Him, all creatures here below;

Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

And that's what Paul is emphasizing here – obviously making the point that we are prone to miss the point and it needs to be reclaimed again and again. To God be the glory!

CONCLUSION:

And that's what makes this worth studying. That's why we're going to take the time to examine the Apostle's words and let the Spirit do His work in our hearts. The gospel of God's rich and free grace is too vital and can be too easily missed otherwise.

I read an article this past week on the thin veneer of freedom in modern Russia. The author, the former Chief Economic Advisor to Vladimir Putin, was making the case that it is only the free societies in the world that experience economic prosperity, lasting security, ongoing development, and international respect. That said, he also recounts the ways his own nation, despite all that such a society would offer, has repeatedly seen such benefits escape because of the short-sighted domination by a few. Indeed, his words are quite courageous given the fate of others who have recently spoken out in similar ways.

And, as I was reading that article, I was struck by the similar struggle we face in our own hearts in laying hold of the freedom offered to us in Christ. So many of us in the church are, as Philip Ryken beautifully puts it, "recovering Pharisees." We've immersed ourselves in religion – regular worship, orthodox theology, moral conduct. Dotting our "i's" and crossing our "t's." And yet all the while, we sense something is missing – God! We've done all those things as though our lives depended on it only to find out Jesus has already done everything for us. And so we've left our own righteousness behind to receive His and are filled with hope. But former Pharisees have a problem. It's hard to leave that old legalism behind. We know we've been saved by grace. The problem comes in then trying to live by grace. And so we find ourselves slipping, sliding back.

And that, my friends, is why we're embarking on this study. Because we need to hear the message of God's grace the first time and then again and again. It is the school from which we never graduate with lessons that seep into every corner of our lives. May the Lord in His mercy help us to see these things, perhaps as if for the very first time.

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