

THE REAL

GOOD NEWS

A SERIES ON GALATIANS



INTRODUCTION

Jesus told the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32. It is about a rebellious son (let's call him 'Raymond') who left his father to go to a faraway country to indulge in all sorts of pleasure. However, when the pleasures of the world could no longer, and indeed they cannot give Raymond meaning and purpose, and when he realised that he had made a grievous mistake, Raymond wondered whether he could still return to his father and become one of the servants.

Upon returning, however, instead of being rejected by his father or being treated like one of the servants, his father embraced him, forgave him and accepted him as his son. His older brother (let's call him 'Judah'), however, was not very happy. Judah could not accept the fact that his father would accept Raymond back to the family. Furthermore, even though Judah had been sticking to his father all this while and had not rebelled against the father, the father had never thrown Judah a party like what he did for Raymond. The father explained the reason why it was right for them to celebrate: Raymond 'was dead, but now is alive; he was lost, and now is found' (Luke 15:32).

It is a beautiful picture of how God lavishes his mercy and grace towards sinners who repent from their sins and return to God. Jesus told this parable when the Pharisees and the scribes were not happy to see Jesus eating and mingling with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus wanted them to understand God's heart for the sinners and to not be like the older brother in the parable.

The parable stops there, and Jesus did not describe further what would happen to the older brother. That's not the intention of this parable. However, please humour me now. Let's imagine what would possibly happen in that family after the party. The celebration was over, the guests went home, and life in the family went on as per normal. Raymond was happy to be part of the family again. However, Judah, perhaps still upset with Raymond, began telling Raymond that although his father accepted him back into the family, his father actually still expected Raymond to repay for his sins in the past.

Judah explained to Raymond that all this while Judah had been doing certain things and performing specific tasks around the house to make sure he was still part of the family. Judah warned Raymond that especially because of his checkered past, he must do the same; otherwise he would risk being thrown out of the family by his father. Raymond was persuaded by Judah. Suddenly the joy and the freedom that Raymond experienced when he returned to his father turned into fear and insecurity. It affects the way Raymond saw his father: no longer a loving and merciful father, but a demanding and overbearing father.

I must emphasise again that this is not part of the parable. However, this is not uncommon for Christians. Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians because this was what happened to the church in Galatia. During his first missionary journey, Paul preached the gospel in a few cities in the province of Galatia (a region of present-day Turkey): Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe (Acts 13 and 14). Many people believed the gospel, became believers and formed churches in those cities.

However, upon Paul's departure, false teachers started to cause troubles in Galatia. These false teachers are believed to be Judaizers, who advocated for a stronger adherence to the Old Testament because they believed that it is necessary for God's people to adopt Jewish customs and practices to be saved. These men also 'mounted a powerful attack on Paul's authority and gospel.' They insisted that Paul did not have the apostolic authority, his gospel message was therefore inadequate, and the Galatians needed more than faith in Christ in order to receive or maintain their salvation.

Upon hearing what had happened, Paul wrote his letter (sometime between 48 and 55 AD) to the Christians in Galatia hoping to counter these false teachings and to encourage the Galatians to return to the real gospel. In chapters 1 and 2, Paul began with a defence of his apostolic authority and hence the authority of the gospel that he preached. He then made it clear in chapters 3 and 4 that in the real gospel, everyone - regardless of their social backgrounds - can enjoy complete salvation in Christ alone. Finally, in chapters 5 and 6, Paul showed that the real gospel leads to true freedom and genuine love for God and one another.

The problem the Galatians faced, unfortunately, is not uncommon even today in the 21st century. Many people became Christians because of the overwhelming grace of Jesus Christ. However, once they are Christians, legalism begins to creep into their life. They think that although saved by grace, they must not fail to perform specific religious duties and they must not fall short in their obedience to God; otherwise God will 'unsave' them. They understood and responded to the gospel when they became Christians. However, over time, the vision of the real gospel becomes blurred, and the legalistic view of salvation slowly takes over. Life as a Christian that is meant to be full of joy and freedom slowly turns to be a burden.

Paul's letter to the Galatians, although written almost 2000 years ago, is very much relevant to us even today. As we study this epistle together, my hope and prayer is that we all have an increasing understanding of the real gospel, so that we will grow in our love for God and one another as a result.

On behalf of the Pastors,
Sandy Citro

THE ORIGIN OF THE REAL GOOD NEWS

Have you ever played the card game UNO? At the start of the game, we often set certain ground rules - no power cards to end the game, “draw four” and “draw two” cards are mutually exclusive, and more. However, these “rules” are actually not mentioned in the original rules that comes with the deck.

The early churches in Galatia was facing a similar situation, where “rules” were added to the original Good News from Paul - causing confusion and division among believers. The freedom brought by the original Good News was eroded. This was the reason Paul wrote his letter to these churches.

Context

- Paul’s opening appears to be boastful (verse 1). Why did Paul start his letter in such a way? See other salutations in Philippians 1:1 and Ephesians 1:1.

Observation

- What was happening within the churches (verse 6)? Why did it happen (verse 7)?

Meaning

- The word “Gospel” means “Good News” in Greek. Why did Paul say that there was no other Gospel apart from what he had taught (verse 7)? What disqualified this “different teaching” (verse 6)?

- Why did Paul remind the churches of his early experience as a Christian (verses 10-11 in particular, and 12-17)?
- What do you think Paul did immediately after his conversion (verse 17, 2:2)? Why did Paul choose not to consult with anyone after receiving revelation from Jesus (verse 16; Acts 9:20)?

Application

- Paul was eager to tell the Galatians the credibility of his Gospel message. He did not make anything up - it was a direct revelation from God. How should we tell others that our Gospel message is not man-made, when we do not have this direct revelation from God?

THE ONLY GOOD NEWS

The Kingdom of God has often been likened to a great feast with representation from every tribe and tongue. The thought of being in a buffet - the endless flow of delicious delicacies and the freedom to choose whatever is on display - might bring a smile to your face. However, imagine enjoying the buffet alone. The joy quickly disappears.

Similarly, Paul showed that the Gospel was meant for both Jews and Gentiles alike as revealed by God with no additional practices needed. A “good news” that is not for all is not good news at all.

Context

In chapter 1, Paul highlighted that the Galatian churches had moved away from the real Gospel. Contrary to the false preachers’ teaching, Paul’s Good News was not man-made. It was a direct revelation from God. In chapter 2, Paul provided another reason why his Gospel message was indeed the real Good News.

Observation

- Why did Paul go up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus (verses 1-5)?
- Who were the people seemed to be influential (verse 6; Acts 15:1-5)?

Meaning

- What was the form of slavery Paul was referring to (verse 4; Acts 15:1-11)?

- What was the significance of verses 7, 8 and 9 to Paul's Good News?
- What did Paul condemn of Cephas (Peter)? Why did Peter react that way (verses 11-12)?

Application

- What actions could potentially erode the Good News? How do we ensure what we preach remains the real Good News?

THE GUTS OF THE GOOD NEWS

Context

In chapters 1 and 2:1-14, Paul told the Galatians that they should not depart from the initial Gospel, that he received the real Good News from Jesus and that his Gospel was approved by the pillars of the church. In chapter 2:15-21, he shared the essence of his Good News.

Observation

- Paul used the word “justified” (“dikaioo” in Greek) three times (verses 15-16), which meant “to render righteous”. As a legal concept, the justified person was the one who received a favourable verdict in a court of law. Why did Paul use a legal word (2 Corinthians 5:10)?

Meaning

- What are the differences between “the works of the law” (Acts 15:1-5; Romans 3:19-20) and “faith in Jesus Christ” (Acts 2:36-38, 4:12)?
- What is the meaning of “die to the law” (Romans 3:21-26, 7:1-6) ? Why did Paul have to die to the law (verse 19)?
- What is the meaning of “crucified with Christ” (5:24; Romans 6:6-11)?

- Having been justified by faith, do we not have to obey the traditions, laws and commandments in the Old Testament (Matthew 5:17-20, 22:36-40; Romans 10:4)?

Application

- How does “justification by faith” help us to deal with our sin, self-esteem and identity?

- How can we encourage one another to live by faith in the Son of God (verse 20; Hebrews 10:19-25; John 15:1-12; 1 John 1:5-10)?

GOOD NEWS VERSUS FAKE NEWS

Context

In chapters 1 and 2, Paul told the Galatians about the credibility of his Gospel message and the guts of his Good News - that a person was justified through faith in Jesus Christ and not works of the law. In chapter 3:1-14, Paul reached back to God's promise to Abraham and reminded the Galatians that salvation came from believing in what God had done.

Observation

- What did Abraham believe (verse 6; Genesis 12:2-3, 15:1-6)?
- It was those of faith who were the sons of Abraham, instead of the Jews (verse 7). How was this different from the accepted thinking at that time (Matthew 3:9; Romans 9:6-8)?

Meaning

- After delivering His people from slavery in Egypt, God gave them the Law through Moses. Why did Paul reach back a few centuries earlier to Abraham?
- How were those of faith blessed (verse 14) along with Abraham, the man of faith (Matthew 1:1; Daniel 7:13-14; 2 Samuel 7:12-16)?

- Why was the law a curse (verses 10 and 13; Romans 4:1-5; James 2:10)?

Application

- It is impossible to completely abide by God's law with our own strength (verse 10). How can we rely on faith, instead of our own works (Romans 10:9; Mark 11:24; John 6:35)?

- How is Christianity different from other religions or worldviews in regards to faith and works?

GOOD NEWS: WE CAN BE GOD'S CHILDREN

Context

In chapter 3:1-14, Paul told the Galatians that they were justified and considered righteous - just like Abraham - because of their faith and not the works of the law. The blessing God had promised to Abraham would also come to the Galatians through faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul then explained the meaning and implications by placing into context:

- The Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12:1-3, 15:5-6, 17:1-14)
- The law handed down to Moses (Exodus 20:1-17) and the strictures in Leviticus
- The Gospel.

Observation

- What was the promise (and its basis) made to Abraham (Genesis 12:2-3)?

Meaning

Although the law did not provide the inheritance, it supplemented the Abrahamic covenant (verses 17-19).

- What was God's purpose in handing down the law (verses 19, 22-24)?
- Under what circumstances can the law be a captor and a guardian at the same time (verses 23-24)?

- What is the role of the law and our faith in inheriting God's promise of salvation (Romans 7:7-20, 8:1-4)?

Application

- How should Christians view God's commandments (Psalms 119:1-8, 97-100; 1 Timothy 1:8-11)?

- We observe a number of practices as a church, such as communion, Sunday services and life group gatherings. How should we view these to avoid the pitfall faced by the Galatian churches (verses 8-11)? Are there religious practices or rituals that you believe can contribute to your salvation?

THE GOOD NEWS SETS US FREE

"I had a budgie named Sidney that I purchased when he was only three weeks old. I let him out of his cage to fly around, so he could taste "freedom". As I got busier, Sidney was neglected and not let out for months. Consequently, the next time I released him, he darted back into his cage and stayed there all day. Although the cage door was wide open, he chose to stay in the cage, which felt safe and comforting."

Through Christ's sacrifice on the cross, the new Christians in Galatia enjoyed the freedom from the power of sin and the Old Testament law. However, they eventually reverted to the old way of religiously keeping the law.

Context

Paul reminded the Galatians of the initial joy of knowing Christ, which once inspired them to assist Paul when he was unwell.

Observation

- Why did Paul remind the Galatians how they had treated him during their first encounter (verses 12-15)?
- What was Paul's view of and relationship with the Galatians (verse 19)?

Meaning

- For what reasons did Paul use the narrative of Hagar and Sarah to counter the Judaizers and to teach the Galatians (3:29; Acts 13:38-39)?

- What was Paul highlighting by referring to “the offense of the cross” (verse 11; 1 Corinthians 1:18)?
- Circumcision is part of the Old Testament law (Genesis 17:10). John the Baptist, Jesus and Paul were circumcised. Why did Paul say that Christ would be of no advantage to those who accepted circumcision (verses 2-6)?

Application

- Circumcision is an example of legalism, where we try to justify our salvation through works.
 - How do legalism, obedience and wisdom differ?
 - What are examples of legalism within the church and our daily lives? How should we respond?
 - What are examples of obedience or wisdom that could be mistaken by others as legalism?

THE GOOD NEWS SHAPES OUR CHARACTER

Context

As the Gospel sets us free, this passage tells us how we should live with our newfound freedom.

“Crucifying the ‘flesh’ is about strangling sin at the motivational level, rather than setting ourselves against sin at the behavioural level.”

Timothy Keller - Galatians for You

Observation

- How could the Gospel be abused (verse 13)? How should we live instead?
- What is Paul’s insight into the Spirit (verse 17)? How can this help us in making choices?

Meaning

- What do the works of the flesh have in common?
- Why did Paul use “works” when referring to the flesh and “fruit” when referring to the Spirit (John 15:1-17)?

Application

- What are the dangers of living by the Spirit, but not keeping in step with the Spirit? How do we keep in step with the Spirit (Romans 8:1-11; Colossians 3:1-17)?
- The table below is adapted from Tim Keller's *Galatians for You*. What could be the motive behind the opposite traits and the fake traits? How do these relate to the conceit Paul warned against (verse 26)?

Spiritual fruit	Opposite trait	Fake trait
Love	Fear Self-protection Abuse on others	Selfish affection
Joy	Hopelessness Despair	Circumstantial elation
Peace	Anxiety Worry	Indifference Apathy
Patience	Resentment	Cynicism
Kindness	Envy	Manipulative good deeds
Goodness	Hypocrisy	Duplicity
Faithfulness	Opportunism	Disingenuousness
Gentleness	Superiority	Inferiority
Self-control	Impulsiveness	Pride-driven willpower

"When we stop looking at our gifts as a sign that we are Christ-like and stop looking at our natural strengths as a sign we are Christ-like, but challenge ourselves to look at the nature, unity and definitions on the Spirit, we have a deeper sense of how we lack these things." - Timothy Keller (*Galatians for You*)

THE GOOD NEWS CHANGES OUR LIFE

Context

Paul encouraged the believers in Galatia to help their brothers and sisters who stumbled or fell into sin. At the same time, he also reminded them to do so with the right attitude. Bearing one another's burdens might not produce any immediate fruit. However, we must persevere with an eternal perspective as we labour in good works.

It's like the brightest sunrise

Waiting on the other side of the darkest night

Don't ever lose hope, hold on and believe

- Danny Gokey - Haven't Seen It Yet

Observation

- What should our attitude be when rendering assistance (Romans 15:1-7)?
- How should we restore someone who has stumbled?

Meaning

- What is the meaning of "keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted" (verse 1)?
- How does bearing one another's burdens fulfil the law of Christ (verse 2; Mark 12:28-34)?

- Why is testing our motivation behind our good works important (verses 3-6)? What did Jesus say about the authenticity of our attitude (Matthew 7:1-5)?

Application

- How do we avoid sowing to the flesh and resist the instant gratification of sin (5:16-21)?
- Visualising what we reap from sowing to the Spirit might be difficult (verse 9). What should we do when we lose heart (Hebrews 12:3)?

THE CENTRE OF THE GOOD NEWS

Context

Paul closed his letter by warning the Galatian believers not to be led astray by the Judaizers, who were Jewish Christians believing that converts to Christianity must be circumcised. Paul dissuaded the Gentile believers in Galatia from doing so (4:21, 5:2-4) and called the Judaizers “false believers” (2:4). He even condemned Peter, when he seemed to embrace the Judaizers in public while privately recognising the errors in their teaching (2 :11-21).

- What was the central teaching Paul was defending (2:16, 3:1-6)?

Observation

- What motivated the Judaizers to spread their teaching? Who did they try to impress (i.e. “make a good showing in the flesh”) (verses 12-13)?

Meaning

- How was “boasting in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (verse 14) shocking or offensive to some people?
- What is the meaning of “a new creation” (verse 15; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Romans 6:4)? How does this relate to “bearing the marks of Jesus” (verse 17)?

Application

- How would you respond if someone persuaded you to do something extra (beyond having faith in Jesus) to be saved?

- How would “boasting in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” look like in our daily lives?

THE REAL GOOD NEWS

In the past nine weeks, we have studied what apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians with regards to the real good news of Jesus Christ. Paul strongly emphasised that one receives salvation and becomes a Christian solely because of their faith in Christ alone, nothing more and nothing else. Paul encouraged the Galatians to cling on to the real gospel and not to move away to any gospel that is contrary to what he has preached. The real gospel leads to freedom, while any other gospels, which are not gospel at all, enslave.

Let's continue to encourage one another to contend for and to hang on to the real gospel of Jesus Christ. Let us resist those who try to obscure it. Let the real gospel give us assurance of our salvation and empower and free us to love and serve one another.