

The Galatians had the real thing

Galatians 1:1-10

¹ Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— ² and all the brothers and sisters with me, To the churches in Galatia: ³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. ⁶ I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— ⁷ which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! ⁹ As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse! ¹⁰ Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

On a hot, steamy summer day you go to a lemonade stand for a nice cool drink. The attendant asks you if you want the kind made with artificial flavoring or do you want the one made with real lemons. It's a no brainer. You don't want imitation. You don't want artificial. You want the real thing. And that's especially true when it comes to religion. When your eternity is at stake, you don't want something that's watered down. You don't want anything false. You want a religion that will feed you and teach you the true Word of God. You want the real thing.

For Christians living in the ancient region of Galatia, the central part of what is now the country of Turkey, they had the real thing. The real thing came their way when the Apostles Paul and Barnabas visited them on a mission journey. Paul had actually visited them on three separate occasions. Each time he brought them good news about our Savior. The Holy Spirit used this good news to create saving faith in their hearts. As a result, Galatian Christians joined other Christians forming several churches in that region of the world. Those churches were flourishing. Then something bad happened. They began to abandon the gospel. Why they did this we'll look at in a little bit. But their abandonment prompted Paul to write this Spirit-inspired letter to them while he was on a later mission journey. The first portion of this letter makes up our text. In those verses Paul had to remind the Galatians that when he was with them, they had the real thing. They had a real apostle sent by God himself to proclaim a real gospel that brought them eternal salvation. May God guide us today on the basis of this text to appreciate how God has given us the real thing here at St. Michael's.

So what happened to the Galatians that prompted Paul to write this letter? Unfortunately, certain people had come into those churches in Galatia and began questioning Paul's authority and teaching. That's why Paul ends this Scripture with this defense: *Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.* Was Paul really an apostle of Christ Jesus? After all, he didn't spend three years with our Lord the way Peter, John and the other apostles did.

The first point that Paul wanted to get across to the Galatians was that he was a real apostle. He was just as real an apostle as Peter, or John or any of the others. That's why Paul begins his letter, *"Paul, an apostle..."* We usually sign our letters at the end. It was customary in Paul's day to sign at the beginning. Paul begins his letter reminding his readers that he is a real

apostle— *sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father*. Many years earlier Paul was better known by the name Saul. Before he became a Christian he made his goal in life to destroy Christianity. He was responsible for putting many Christians in prison and having some put to death. The Book of Acts tells us he was present at the stoning death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and giving approval to Stephen's death. But while he was on the road to a city called Damascus, his whole life changed. Our Lord Jesus appeared to Saul and converted him. Saul the persecutor of Christ and his followers became Paul the proclaimer of Christ. Paul later described this event when Jesus told him, *"I am sending you to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me"* (Acts 26:16-18). Paul had to remind the Galatians that he was a real apostle, sent to them by God himself.

Paul also had to remind the Galatians that he was a real apostle with a real saving message. In the opening verses of this letter, Paul sums up the saving message he shared in Galatia. Paul writes, *"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."* Paul reminded the Galatians of the grace and peace they had from God. This was not something they earned. All they earned from God was his eternal wrath and punishment. But Paul reminded them that they need not fear God. They had received grace from God and they were at peace with God. The reason for this is that our Lord Jesus Christ *"gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father."* Jesus carried out his Father's saving will by exchanging his glorious life in heaven for a humble existence on earth. During his life Jesus was obedient. He traded his holiness for our sin. He gave up his life to pay for every one of us. Jesus did it all to rescue us from Satan, from our sin's punishment, and from eternal death. Paul shared that good news of our Lord's rescue when he was with them in person. He repeated it when he wrote them this epistle. For the Galatians there should be no doubt. Paul had a real message with good news that saved them. He was a real apostle sent by God.

Do we always recognize that the men and women who serve in the public ministry are sent by God? They may be assigned right out of school or maybe you voted for them in a call meeting. But all of them are sent by God himself. Paul had some encouraging words for a group of public ministers that he had appointed: *"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers"* (Acts 20:28). Even though Paul had trained them and appointed them to serve it was really the Holy Spirit who sent them. God has sent you all your public ministers. Since they come to you with a divine call, you know that honor is due them. They like all Christians, must struggle with temptation and sin and with their own shortcomings. They need your encouragement. What an awesome responsibility to be Christ's spokesmen. Through his prophet Jeremiah, our Lord says, *"Let the one who has my word speak it faithfully"* (23:28). Speaking God's Word faithfully is not always easy. Especially when people don't care to listen. But sin must be pointed out and sinners must be led to repent. Then what pure joy it is to announce God's forgiveness to a repentant person. May God continue to bless us with public ministers like Paul—servants who are faithful in sharing the true Word of God.

Paul wanted the Galatians to know they had the real thing. Paul was a real apostle sent to them by Jesus himself with a real saving message. And Paul especially wanted them to know that in his message they had the real gospel.

That's why Paul points out right away in this letter, *"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all."* While Paul was proclaiming the good news of Christ in another part of the world, he received word of the trouble brewing among the Galatian churches. Shockingly many of them were turning away from the gospel. How could this happen? Paul tells us. *Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.* Paul doesn't tell us who these deceivers are in this letter. From other parts of Scripture, we learn of a group of false teachers called Judaizers. These false teachers came into the Galatian churches and began preaching a different gospel than what they heard Paul preach. In the Book of Acts we hear, *"Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved'"* (15:1). Besides circumcision, gentile believers were told to observe all the rules and regulations that God gave to Old Testament Israel. But God didn't give Israel his law to show them how to be saved. Paul explains in his letter to the Colossians; *"These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ"* (2:16). God used rules and regulations to point his people ahead to Christ. When Christ came, he *"canceled the written code, with its regulations"* (2:14). Christ did this by fulfilling everything God required of us. After fulfilling every righteous requirement, Christ took the place of every sinner on a cross and suffered God's punishment for every sin. He died, of course. But on the third day he was alive again with a victory that assures us all of forgiveness and eternal life. That was gospel—real good news.

Then some men came and said that's not good enough. You still need to live like an Old Testament Jew if you want heaven. That was not the real gospel. It was not gospel at all. That's why Paul used the strong words that he did. *But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse!* Paul doesn't care if the message is coming from him, or Peter or another apostle, or even from an angel in heaven. If they are telling a way to heaven other than through the saving work of Christ Jesus, let that person be condemned. Paul wanted so much for the Galatian Christians to keep the real gospel. He had to use strong words: *If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!*

You and I need to listen carefully to Paul's words of warning. By nature, we are never satisfied with Jesus' saving work. Sinful flesh always wants to add something. We want to come up with some righteous reason that would prompt God to love us. But Isaiah explained it well: even our most righteous acts are nothing but filthy rags (64:6). Later in this letter Paul tells the Galatians the danger of trying to add to Christ's saving work: *You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace* (5:4).

You want real good news. Then look to Jesus to find it. He's the reason God loves you. He's the reason God forgives you. Jesus is why you are at peace with God. His innocent life. His sacrificial death. His glorious return to life us reminds us why we're forgiven. If you are being shown your reason for hope is Jesus, then you have the right gospel. Only Jesus can make you right with God. Only Jesus can win you a place in heaven. You don't need to do a thing. He's done it all. He's the right Savior for everyone.

Lemonade? Real or artificial? On a hot day you'll drink anything. Eternal life? The right Savior and the right gospel will get you there. If Jesus is that Savior, you've got it right.