

Windsor Locks
Congregational Church
of
Windsor Locks, Connecticut

Sermon Transcript
Sunday, August 15, 2021

Galatians: The Gospel
Galatians 1:1-12

This message from Scripture was given to The Windsor Locks Congregational Church of Windsor Locks, at 8 Main Street, Windsor Locks, CT, 06096, on August 15, 2021, by Pastor David Rucquoi. This transcription bears the strengths and weaknesses of oral delivery and is not intended to be a polished essay; rather, is provided as an additional resource for the message.

Sermon Text
Galatians 1:1-12 (ESV)

“Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—² and all the brothers who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

⁶ 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.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. ¹² For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Introduction

Good morning Windsor Locks Congregational Church. It is a delight and honor to be back with you this Sunday, and I look forward to being with you for three Sundays in a row. I bring you greetings from the Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church.

For the next three Sundays we will be looking at Paul's letter to the Galatian church. To be sure, the book of Galatians is packed with intense, deep theology. Considered a "little Romans," the book itself is the length of a 30-minute sermon. I could read it to you in its entirety, which is how the original recipients would have received it. But the length of the text does not represent the depth. Tim Keller covered the content in 30 messages (roughly 15 hours of preaching). One commentary I have on Galatians is 320 pages long. Another is 250 pages. This text is the basis for transformative movements in human history. So the next three Sundays will be just a high-level perspective of the content (the proverbial 30,000 foot view), as we fly over the mountains and valleys in the text. Your ability to appreciate this perspective will be largely dependent upon whether you put on your proverbial glasses.

To glean the most you can from these messages, I encourage you to read Galatians several times each week. If possible, use different translations. Each week my transcript will be available in printed and electronic form, to help you process during and after each sermon. Pray for understanding. Discuss your observations in your small groups and amongst your friends. And, if you really want to get a moving, dynamic understanding of the text, I encourage you to read "*The Silas Diary*," by Gene Edwards, available on Kindle or paperback. This is a historical fiction that dramatically depicts the perspective of Silas, Paul's companion, weaving well-researched biblical text with hypothetical (and likely) narrative, giving a rich understanding of the history and theologies we encounter in Paul's letter to the Galatian churches.

Paul's history with the Galatian churches begins in Acts 15-16, where we read about his first missionary journey with Barnabas, commissioned by their home church in Antioch of Syria. Together they planted four churches in Galatia, in the cities of Antioch of Pisidia, Lystra, Iconium and Derbe. After this trip they returned to their sending church, Antioch of Syria, where they reported how God had "*opened the door of faith to the Gentiles*" (Acts 14:27). In Acts 15 we are told of a group of Jews (from the area of Jerusalem) who went to Antioch of Syria teaching that Gentile believers needed to conform to the laws of Moses to be saved (their pivotal issue was circumcision). This was likely when Paul publicly confronted Peter over this issue. It is also likely this is when Paul wrote this letter to the Galatian churches. After much debate, Paul, Barnabas and others were sent to meet with the apostles (in Jerusalem) to settle the issue. Acts 15 records Peter and James speaking up, in response to a group of Pharisees who were believers. All the apostles and elders came to discuss the matter, and the debate was intense. Eventually Peter said, "*we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they [the Gentiles] will*" (Acts 15:11). Jesus' brother (James) confirmed this position, quoting Old Testament scripture. This Jerusalem counsel ended with the whole church agreeing, and a letter was sent back to Antioch (with Paul, Barnabas, and their companions, adding Judas, and Silas), clarifying that Gentiles do not need to adhere to Jewish law to become Christians. Acts 15 ends with Paul (accompanied by Silas) going back to the Galatian churches

to check on their welfare (Acts 16). He also visited the Galatian churches in his third journey (Acts 18:23).

The tone of the Galatian letter is different from Paul's other letters. Paul authored 13 letters in the New Testament, all written from around AD 50-67. Of the 13, only three others do not include the typical salutation, giving thanks for the recipient. First Timothy and Titus each have the distinct intimacy of being addressed to a "son." For Timothy and Titus, Paul is too intimate to apply standard protocol, and uses a more affectionate greeting. But in Second Corinthians, like Galatians, Paul found it necessary to defend and establish his authority and credibility as an apostle. To the Corinthian and Galatian churches, this man (who worked to pay his own expenses, whose body is covered with the scars of passionate commitment, who spent many months caring for them, yet whose authenticity is in question) has no intention of softening his tone. The Galatian letter is unusually and immediately harsh.

Paul's opponent claims to be sent by James, with a message endorsed by the leaders in Jerusalem. Within his greeting Paul makes it clear he is not an apostle ("sent one") of men, but of God (v. 1), then provides them a message from God himself. This ultimate name dropping is contrasted with "*the present evil age,*" (v. 3) setting the tone of conflict between two incompatible factors he very intentionally bifurcates throughout the letter. To Paul, compromise in this matter is unfathomable. His strategy is to expose and condemn error. In doing so, he does not hesitate to make it personal. In v. 6 he confronts the Galatians saying, "*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ,*" then quickly confronts the opposition as "*some who trouble you*" saying, "*let him be accursed,*" adding, "*I say again...let him be accursed*" (v. 9). Of the constant innuendos and harsh references throughout the letter; Paul crescendos in chapter 3 saying, "*O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you...are you so foolish?*" In 4:12 he says, "*I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you*" (NIV). His harshest language is in 5:12 where, after spending time arguing against circumcision (the representative element of the law) Paul declares, "*I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves.*" With language the translators struggle to keep appropriate, Paul is not simply venting frustration. His argument against the law is that nothing is ever "good enough." And if you pursue the identity of being "good enough" based on anything other than Christ, you will be in complete bondage. If you think you will be "good enough" by being beautiful, you could be deceived until you die of bulimia, anorexia, or simply lonely and proud. If you think you will be "good enough" by being sexually alluring, you will find yourself alone (at best) or dying a painful death from social disease. If you think you will be "good enough" by being rich, there will always be the allusive "more," leading you to never being satisfied. If you think you will be "good enough" by serving others, there will always be more to do, and do better. And if you think you will be "good enough" by obeying a law (like circumcision), why not go all the way? Paul ends his letter stating tersely, "*From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus*" (6:17). Keeping with the arguments against circumcision, as the representative Jewish requirement, Paul uses the same argument he did when writing the Corinthians. To them he recounted the five times he received 39 lashes, until his back was raw, three times he was beaten with rods, once he was stoned, he was starved, he froze (2 Cor. 11), if the mutilation of circumcision gives one authority, Paul is saying his entire body has been mutilated, in addition to being circumcised the eighth day. He's saying those comfortable hypocrites promoting the law don't know what commitment or faith is,

and that his own scars should amply testify to both, for the cause of the gospel. To Paul, and there is likely some “human” element to his argument, his visibly broken and sore body validate both the message and the messenger, making it a ridiculous insult to think the comfortable representatives of the law could possibly represent the Jesus who died for them on the cross. This fiery language from the same human author of the love chapter (1 Cor. 13), and the endearing books of Ephesians (which emphasizes unity), and Philippians (which emphasizes joy), is meant to get the reader’s attention and begs the question, what’s all the fuss about?

Before we answer that question, I’d like to give you a quick overview of Paul’s arguments in this document. I’ll warn you in advance, the following is what you get when an MBA goes to seminary. In trying to grasp the themes of the text, I created a Word document of Galatians, allowing me to mark and notate freely. Then I highlighted repeated words, using different colors for some concepts such as the law, the Holy Spirit, the gospel, faith etc. The results were interesting, so I put them on a graph. I did this just to get my own hands around the text, and I thought you might be interested to see it. Notice first the constant theme of “*some who trouble you.*” Paul has different ways of addressing the adversary (“let him be accursed,” “false brothers,” “certain men,” “the circumcision party,” etc.). However he refers to them, they are a constant theme throughout the letter.

This curve flattens immediately as we compare it with references to the law. Paul makes a big deal about the law building up to the third chapter, then tapers off to something else.

One theme he builds up consistently is the Holy Spirit, which is mostly discussed in chapter 5.

Paul’s opening priority is the gospel. In chapter two the law and the gospel are compared evenly. By chapter three he is attacking the law, in defense of the gospel. And his growing alternative is the Holy Spirit, all in the context of “*some who trouble you.*”

Then we look at faith, which we see is almost head-to-head with the law in all chapters. Halfway through the book the theme of faith is nearly replaced by a focus on the Holy Spirit.

You’ll notice chapter 4 shows a decline in almost all these themes. In his constant bifurcation of good and bad, this is where Paul contrasts being a child vs. being a slave, or Hagar vs. Sarah, or Isaac vs. Ishmael, the flesh vs. the promise.

Finally, we look at Paul’s references to “Jesus,” “Jesus Christ,” “God’s son,” or “The Lord.” He is the priority in the beginning, and in the end. The only times any element is mentioned more, is when Paul focuses on faith (vs. the law) and the Holy Spirit. We could add many themes to the graph, and probably fine tune any of these counts; but, based on this, Paul’s letter to the Galatian churches is consistent with the author of Hebrew’s admonition where we are encouraged, in the context of distractions, to keep our focus on Jesus (Heb. 12:2).

So, back to our question, what’s all the fuss about? In reading the first chapter of Galatians one can hardly miss the core of Paul’s concern: it is what he refers to as “*the grace of Christ,*” “*the gospel of Christ,*” or simply the “*gospel*” (1:6-7). This is what the angel proclaimed to the shepherds, as they were “*keeping watch over their flocks by night*” (Luke 2:8-10) saying, “*Fear*

not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy.... To the Romans Paul declared that the gospel *“is the power of God for salvation”* (Rom. 1:16). In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians we read, *“Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you...For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive...”* (1 Cor. 15:1-6). This word used in Galatians for “gospel” comes from two words meaning “good” and “to proclaim.” It means to bring good news.

What is this good news? Tim Keller graphically depicts the gospel as difficult to grasp, pointing out that when something is difficult to grasp it could be the nature of the object, or it could be the nature of your hands.¹ I recently experienced this at the car wash. I was using their bathroom and after washing my hands I noticed they had sanitizer as well, so I put some on. As result, I couldn’t turn the round knob to unlock the door and get out. I was completely stuck, and the problem was me, not the door knob. It was funny, until I realized I really could not get out. I finally was able to use a paper towel for grip, or I’d still be there. But the reason we struggle with the gospel is not a problem with the gospel, it’s a problem with us. I first encountered the gospel when I was 10 years old. In the past, I had been to church with my family for Christmas and Easter. I had knowledge, but I didn’t understand until it was explained to me that the baby in the manger was the man on the cross, and that He chose to leave heaven and come to earth to voluntarily die on the cross, and that He did this because my sins separated me from God. Jesus chose to take the burden of my sins, so I could be reconciled with God. This was His gift to me; but, like any gift, it wasn’t mine unless I receive it, so I did. And here’s the challenge: I wept. I had a keen sense that something was being let go, and I wanted to let go and grasp what was being held out. At the same time, I knew this wasn’t my clever choice, like other choices. Something was happening to me, and I knew it. This set my life on a course, from childhood. This may seem simple and straight forward, and we are so tempted to think, “That’s it? OK, now let’s move on to the hard stuff.” But here’s where things get slippery. The moment you think the gospel is simple and you’ve got a grasp on it is the very proof that you don’t get it at all. It is when it seems ungraspable and overwhelming that you know you are beginning to grasp it.² And to be indifferent to the gospel is the proof that you don’t really understand it at all. You have no concept of what you are rejecting. N.T. Wright puts it this way, “When we begin to glimpse the reality of God, the natural reaction is to worship him. Not to have that reaction is a fairly sure sign that we haven’t yet really understood who he is or what he’s done.”³

I went to college down South, and when I came home someone else was always driving because I did not have a car. After nearly every semester, coming up the New Jersey Turnpike, I was awakened and knew I was getting close to home because of the smell. In my groggy stupor it became my habit to look at the NYC skyline and hold the twin towers between my fingers, intrigued at the concept of perspective. One year we had a trip to NYC and visited the twin towers. Standing next to one of them I marveled at the difference in perspective. Remembering

¹ Tim Keller, Grace Bible Church, Galatians Sermons: I No Longer Live the Life I Live, Accessed August 13, 2021, <https://cdn.gutensite.com/web001/site/3357/1452477/1452477.mp3>.

² Ibid.

³ AZ Quotes, https://www.azquotes.com/author/15971-N_T_Wright, Accessed August 30, 2019.

my habit, it seemed appropriate to me (though admittedly odd to any onlookers) to do the opposite. So I walked up to the building and put my nose against it, then I looked up. I was immediately consumed by a sense of vertigo, lost my balance, and fell backwards. In a similar way, when we are distant from God (and He won't force us into relationship) He seems like no big deal. Shakespeare might say, "Much Ado About Nothing." However, when you even begin to encounter the reality of His presence, not unlike me standing with my nose against one of the towers, you cannot fathom all of Him, but all that you can fathom, He is there. This is what Paul prayed for the Ephesians when he said, "*that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God*" (Eph. 3:17-19).

The gospel is so simple that a child can grasp it. It is so complex, we can spend our lives trying to grasp it.

Why is this so important to Paul? Well, first, Paul had an inexplicable encounter with God, describing his experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9) as a divine, life-altering confrontation. In this letter to the Galatians he explains that after his traumatic conversion, he went to Arabia. It appears he was alone in the desert; and, in that time, "Arabia" would have included where Moses received the law. Whether this confused Pharisee went to a specific place, or just needed time alone to process the events, we don't know. He then returned to Damascus, to be in fellowship with the community that strengthened him initially (including Ananias), and was immediately passionate about the gospel. Before long, he was humbly sent home to Tarsus, protected by the very people he was previously persecuting. It was over 17 years before he re-enters the narrative, thanks to Barnabas. Paul had a life-changing encounter with God.

Second, having searched the Scriptures Paul found the events of Christ's passion were all foretold. The promise given to Abraham came before circumcision, and before the law. Abraham was counted as "good enough" because he trusted in God's promise. The lamb given to Abraham, as an alternative to Isaac, foreshadowed what Jesus would do on the cross for all mankind. Jesus was the Passover lamb. The blood on the side door posts and upper post of the Israelite homes created the shape of a cross. The Psalms foretold the events of the gospel in great detail, which the prophets reiterated.

Third, Jesus intentionally died for our sins, He willfully raised from the dead. That is the power of the gospel. It overcomes the greatest threat to life: death. And both Jesus' bodily death and bodily resurrection were equally public. They could not be refuted nor denied, confronting the intellect with an inexplicable power.

Yet it goes deeper and deeper the more one searches, for (fourth) the resurrection validates the claim that Christ could be "*pierced for our transgressions ... crushed for our iniquities...*" and that we can be healed by his wounds (Is. 53:5). The resurrection of Christ gave undeniable credibility to the Old Testament prophecy, and the claims of Jesus.

Fifth, after nearly twenty years of discovering his own faith, Paul was convicted, convinced, and committed. Paul was experiencing freedom from the weight of sin, and from the burden of the law. His personal awe of God's grace made him treasure it.

The sixth reason this was so important to Paul is that the more he grew to love the risen Christ, the more contempt he had for those opposed to Christ. A psychologist might propose that Paul was fighting against his old self. This may be true, but it could equally be true that Paul's experience gave him valid appreciation for our spiritual battle, and an ingrained contempt for the "dark side." I have never met so great an opponent for alcohol addiction than I have in a self-proclaimed alcoholic-gone-dry. Vance Havner once said, "The devil is not fighting religion. He's too smart for that. He is producing a counterfeit Christianity, so much like the real one that good Christians are afraid to speak out against it."⁴ To Paul, who was overwhelmed by God's grace to him, it was this notion of a counterfeit, that was deceiving the saints, and deceptively working to nullify the impact of Christ's work on the cross, that Paul could not tolerate.

Finally, in meeting the Christ of the gospel, Paul's life was transformed by a relationship. Not only did Paul realize that the truth he held all his life was inaccurate, he came to realize there was a personal God reaching out to him, and all mankind. Listen to how intimately chapter 2 ends as Paul says, "*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*" (2:20). Paul was not moved to conviction by a superior notion, or by religious vigor. He had plenty of that before he was confronted on the Damascus Road. But on that road, he met a person. Notice, every time Paul relayed this story he never said, "So I left Judaism and became a Christian." Or, "I heard a voice that said, "You need to repent and become a Christian." What Paul heard was, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*" To which Saul replied, "*Who are you, Lord?*" The response he never got over was when he heard, "*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*" And over the past 17+ years Jesus became his best friend.

Today we introduced Paul's letter to the Galatian churches, and focused on one aspect of that letter, the gospel. Over the next couple of Sundays we will seek to broaden our understanding of the context, focusing on another single element each week.

Earlier I mentioned how the gospel is both simple and complex. I have tried to point out why Paul found it so valuably transformative. Before he was confronted by the gospel, Paul was both comfortable and confident in who he was; but, in an unexpected moment, Paul was confronted by the notion that his confidence was resting on an unreliable foundation. Not everyone gets literally knocked off their saddle. Not everyone is confronted by a great light until they are blind. But everyone needs to take stock of their lives and consider the offer of the Almighty. We are told that "*God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*" (Rom. 5:8). And that, "*if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved*" (Rom. 10:9). If you are here today and have not received God's gift of grace, what Paul found so valuably transformative is available for you too.

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⁴ Vance Havner Quotes, Citatis, Accessed August 12, 2021, <https://citatis.com/a2341/320806/>.