

Text: Gal 1.1-14  
St Stephen's

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Sat/Sun

## The Weight of Grace

**Paul's missionary career** lasted about 30 years, during which he made three missionary journeys, evangelizing the gentile peoples of Asia Minor and planting churches. One of these journeys was through regions located in **modern day Turkey and Greece**. Hundreds of people responded to the gospel. After these churches were started, Paul wrote them **letters** to strengthen their life and ministry. Many people think that the **first of his letters** was the letter to the Galatians, which we are going to be looking at for the next couple of months. Galatians is all about **slavery and freedom and the Gospel**.

**Slavery comes in many forms**. Virtually every nation in the history of the world has known **human slavery**, including our own. There are **other kinds** of slavery also (ask people...). You can be a slave to passions, or to pleasures. You can be enslaved in a destructive relationship. You can be a slave to spending or debt. You can be a slave to sin and guilt and condemnation. You can be a slave to religious fanaticism.

Here's the thing about slaves. They all **want to be free!**

**The Gospel is about freedom**. Freedom from sin and guilt and condemnation. Freedom from the destructive impulses inside you and around you. Freedom from fear. Freedom from death. Freedom from bitterness and hatred and loneliness.

When someone finds this freedom in Jesus, you can just see it. They get this **joy!** This delight! They know they've been **forgiven**, and they don't have to go back to the old stuff anymore! They know way down deep that they are **loved by God**, and their **fears** begin to melt. Sometimes they just **soar** in their spirits in worship. They have this **sense of God**

that surges and overflows. They have a **happiness** that is contagious. When they are walking towards you, a smile just breaks out ear to ear when you see `em coming. You know people like that. Don't you have moments like that? That is the freedom of the Gospel.

But gospel **freedom can be lost**. Abandoned. Forgotten. It seems, in fact, as though there are forces inside and outside us that give us a recurring tendency to walk away from the freedom we've been given. It seems sometimes like we are **freed slaves**, choosing to go back into slavery. Like birds, freed from a cage, but who won't fly out.

Eugene Peterson... "Traveling Light"

*If we get our information from the biblical material, there is no doubt that the Christian life is a **dancing, leaping, daring life...** We might fairly suppose that a congregation of Christians, well stocked with **freedom stories** ...stories of Jesus setting people free - and who keep this Jesus at the center of their attention in weekly worship, would be sensitive to any encroachment on their freedom.*

***But in fact the very place where we are most likely to experience the free life, is also the very place where we are in most danger of losing it.***

That is exactly **why the letter to the Galatians was written**. Some years after Paul planted the church, **other teachers** came in who **attacked Paul's ministry**. It turned out that their attack was on the gospel itself and on the freedom it gives. So Paul writes,

*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel — not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.*

Galatians 1:6-7 (RSV)

"*Deserting*" = switching sides. Turncoats. Traitors.

What was going on?

*"there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ"*

= Teachers from Israel who were following Paul around. Jews who believed in Jesus and who also believed in Moses.

What was *their message*? **Their formula** was –

**Faith in Christ + Obedience to Moses = God's Salvation**

*"Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."*

Acts 15:1 (RSV)

They were saying, "Listen all you Gentiles... Believing in Jesus is good! He is the Messiah. But after believing, you must be circumcised and obey the law of Moses also." You must keep the **moral law** of Moses, the 10 commandments, and the hundreds of other commandments that tell you exactly how to live. And you must keep the **ceremonial law** of Moses, the feasts and the fasts, the dietary regulations of clean and unclean, the laws that set the cycle of your day and your week and your year. And you must signify this by your willingness to be **circumcised**. You must **become Jewish to become Christian**.

We have a word for this spirituality. We call it **legalism**. **It adds our earning to God's grace**, often calling for adherence to petty standards. It is the enemy of grace. You know **what legalism looks like**. It doesn't look like the freedom I described before. It is **grim, rigid**, exacting, petty, controlling, **always criticizing** others. It thrives upon guilt and fear and shame. It **suffocates** grace and freedom.

**Paul Tournier** talked once about the spirit of criticism in the creative arts... "in all fields, even those of culture and art, **other people's judgment exercises a paralyzing effect**. Fear of criticism kills spontaneity; it prevents men from showing themselves and expressing themselves freely, as they are. Much courage is needed to paint a picture, to write a book, to erect a building designed along new architectural lines, or to formulate an original opinion or an original idea...

## He's just saying that people grow best in a climate of grace.

**Paul's Gospel** was:

### **Faith in Christ = God's Salvation**

*a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, because by works of the law shall no one be justified.*

Galatians 2:16 (RSV)

### **The Legalists said...**

Christ's effort is not enough.

Salvation must be earned

### **Paul said...**

It is. "It is finished"

It is a free gift, unearned

Look again at vv 6-7

*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel — not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.*

Galatians 1:6-7 (RSV)

Paul says that if you follow these teachers, you are "*deserting him who called you*". Walking away from Christ. **Leaving him.** You think you are getting more religious, closer to God. But you are actually leaving him. Deserting him. Abandoning him.

**Why?** Because **instead of depending on him**, on him alone to do what you can't do, have never been able to do, **you are now depending upon yourself**, on your own efforts, your own earning. That will never work. It is a dead end street.

And look what he goes on to say...

*But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.*

Galatians 1:8-9 (RSV)

Wow! Doesn't that sound tough? Narrow minded? Intolerant? Why is Paul so intense, so insistent?

Because all the other so-called 'gospels' **depend on human effort**. They have **been tried**. And they all fail. Only New Testament Christianity says **God will do it all, and give it to you**. It is the gospel of Jesus. There is **no other religion** in the history of the world that preaches that message. Not one. It is the **gospel of grace from the God of grace**.

That is **the message that sets people free**. That **takes the load off** our backs. That **unburdens** our lives. That **lifts the guilt** and **heals the shame** of our broken lives. That sets us free!

That is why Paul is so intense, so insistent about the gospel. Because it is **the engine** that pulls everything else along. It is **the centerpiece** of everything God does. If you add to it, or take from it, you **change it** into some variant of what the whole rest of the world has done forever – and failed. Some variant of salvation by human earning.

So **be clear** about grace. **Be strong** about grace. It outweighs everything else. Everything.

A closing thought: **Casey Stengel** used to say: "**The main thing is to make the main thing the main thing.**" The gospel of grace is the main thing in our faith. It outweighs everything else. So...

- Go light on guilt and condemnation and unforgiveness. Go big on grace.
- Go light on your self-criticism, your perfectionism. Go big on grace.
- Go light on your list of do's and don'ts for everyone else. Go big on grace.
- Go light on your opinions and preferences about life. Go big on grace.
- Go light on your plans for changing everyone. Go big on grace.

You get the idea. Grace can get done what human effort will never get done. It **sets people free** to live for God.