

## Galatians 1:1-10. Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> September '24. God's Gospel of Freedom... Deserted.

**PRAY. v6** Some of you will have heard of the Welsh rock band the Manic Street Preachers, and their album “this is my truth, tell me yours” x2. It's quite old now, but their album title is still just as relevant 26 years on.

Truth today is something that varies from person to person. It's kind of fluid: It doesn't really matter what you believe, about yourself, your identity, your ideology: from new age to karma to “love is love” to whatever version of Christianity that particularly floats your boat, so long as you are true to yourself, and certainly so long as you don't force it down other people's throats, that's what matters. People are sceptical of Truth with a capital T, seeing it worst of all as a human invention, designed to trample on others and keep the privileged in positions of power. So “no” to capital T truth they say, “This is my truth, tell me yours”. It sounds so warm and inclusive.

But then what do we make of Jesus Christ? He said “I am the way, the TRUTH, and the life” and he spoke about objective rights and wrongs and just one way to God. But he didn't do it in an oppressive or harsh way, in fact he died for the very people who opposed and oppressed him.

Well for the next 13 weeks, we are going to be looking at the book of Galatians, a letter written by the Apostle Paul to a group of early Christians living in what we now call Turkey a few years after the life of Jesus.

And I'm afraid to say that its writer, Paul breaks the unspoken rule. He tells the Galatians that when it comes to what they believe, they have got it wrong, very wrong. They have wandered from the capital T truth.

In fact, they have been so dangerously influenced by one particular subtle idea, that they are in danger of losing everything. v6 is a strong rebuke. v6.

The situation in Galatia is like this. Paul, Jesus' authorised messenger visited the people of what today is South Turkey as we saw on his first missionary journey. Here's the map. – most likely places like Lystra, Derbe, Iconium and Antioch (not to be confused with the other Antioch- his mission base). [And by the way, for those who want to know all the details this is all probably happening around 48 AD and likely before the Jerusalem council that we read about in Acts 15].

Paul taught the people the amazing news that he had come to discover on the Damascus Road. That Jesus of Nazareth is alive from the dead, and he's the ruler of the universe. If anyone puts their trust in Jesus, then no matter what they've done they are friends with God, adopted into his family. Acceptance with God is now available as a free gift to anyone from any background who comes empty handed to Christ (hence the gift imagery). It's wonderful and it's liberating.

But since he left false teachers, we might call them influencers, came in advocating one particular new idea, or extra, that people had to add to the Christian message. And the new truth was they claimed an old truth. It wasn't enough to just believe in Jesus, you had to be circumcised like a Jew to be a proper Christian. Yes, trusting Jesus was a great start, but to be the real deal, you had to add the “works of the law”, the extras of Judaism.

Well Galatians is an impassioned plea to a group of churches NOT to abandon the gospel of **good news**, by adding to it. We're going to look 3 things about the good news of Christianity that Paul teaches us in the Bible, and as we do so I think we will find that it is frighteningly easier than we think to abandon the gospel.

And the main point?

**Whatever you do, don't abandon Paul's gospel.**

### **1) PAUL'S GOSPEL IS THE GOSPEL OF GOD v1,2.**

▲ I wonder if any of CCHY are learning French. And I wonder if any of you have had to learn how to write a letter in French. Every culture has its own particular form for letter writing, like the formal French letter which was supposed to end with “*Je vous prie d'agr er, Madame, l'expression de mes sentiments les plus distingu es*”- whatever that means.

Well in Paul's culture a letter began with who it was from: **Paul**, (like our emails) and then you said who it was to **The churches in Galatia** and then you wrote a greeting as we have here in verses 3 to 5.

But Paul is so worked up about the Galatians, and so worried about them, that his introduction is pregnant and bursting with loaded terms which he can't help spilling over into. “Dear *generous granny!*” Look at **verse 1**.

Like nearly every letter, Paul introduces himself as an **apostle**- meaning that he spoke for Jesus Christ, with his authority. Authority is not a bad thing, it comes from God who is wonderfully good and wonderfully great and over us. What a relief that the good God of the universe is in charge and uses his good authority to rule over us. And he authorises messengers to carry his words to us and they are written to us in the Bible.

But he goes on to bolster and underline this authority in the rest of the verse with some negatives. **v1**. Right from the start Paul wants to make it clear that his authority did not originate on planet earth (like the tarmac vs meteorite), he is an apostle through Jesus and God the Father.

And if his authority comes from God, then his message, the gospel comes from God too. This is so important to the Galatians. His ideas are not pick and mix take what you like from your favourite social media platform. God came into the world and died and rose from the dead, and met with Paul on the Damascus road, and gave him his message to share. So if we reject Paul's message (as the Galatians were beginning to do) we reject God's message.

☞ A lot of people today are a bit iffy about Paul. They say “we like Jesus”, but we're not so sure about some of the things Paul wrote, for example about women or homosexuality. Someone complained about our church as being in danger of falling into “Paulianity” rather than Christianity.

Now it's OK to find Paul's teaching hard, even Peter admitted that. But it's not OK to pick some of what Paul said and reject the rest of it. If you want to be Christian, you need to listen to Paul, because he was sent by Christ, and actually once you understand it what he said was wonderfully good!

And the tragedy was that the churches (interesting- multiple churches v2) were moving away from what Paul and therefore God was saying to human ideas made on planet earth. More on this next time. So the **gospel is from God**, which is why whatever you do, you mustn't abandon Paul's gospel.

### But secondly... **2) PAUL'S GOSPEL IS THE GOSPEL OF FREEDOM**

Look at v3-5. It could look like any old greeting, something you might be tempted to skip over, like “Dear generous Granny, I hope you are well”. But with Paul ordinary phrases are loaded terms. **Grace** (GRACE, God's Riches at Christ's Expense) is the very thing which was at stake in Galatia... (5:3 you have fallen from grace). And **Peace**- a right relationship with God.

But look where those come from v3,4. In verse 4 is the very key to the difference between Christianity, and every other religion in the world- between True religion- the gospel, and false religion- everything else.

Look carefully at the verb, v4. Christ **gave himself** for our sins. Who is doing the work? it is Jesus. every other religion in the book is about what we do for God. Praying, Fasting, Reading the Scriptures, going on a pilgrimage, meditating your way up the scale, coming to church climbing the ladders of good works, closing the gap between man and God by penance. DOING stuff. Christianity is about what Christ has done for us. He gave himself up for our sins, to rescue us.

▲ You'll be aware that in August the superyacht "Bayesian" was flipped over by a horrendous storm downburst off Sicily tragically killing 15 people including tech entrepreneur Mike Lynch and his wife and daughter. The investigation is still ongoing. Charlotte Golunski was a British woman who was thrown into the sea that night with her 1 year old daughter Sophie. She spoke afterwards of clutching her baby in the air with all her strength to keep her from drowning. She, her baby and her husband James were rescued by a nearby sailing boat captain.

Now in that kind of situation you need a rescue. Forgive me for being flippant but you don't need swimming instructions. You need someone who is going to pull your child out of the water. Others weren't so fortunate.

The Bible says that we are in a dreadful situation. We are living in this present evil age (v4). If anyone doesn't believe that read the news each week. Last week another four people were gunned down by a teenage killer in a Georgia school. I don't think that anyone would disagree with the local sheriff who called it "pure evil".

We are living in an evil world, affected by an evil personality the devil, and it's not just murderers: we have an evil nature. We need rescue- from ourselves, from this evil age we are living in. And that is what our kind and good God wants. He wants to take us to a better place, a better world.

He didn't say I'll do 95% the rest is yours, no the work is all Jesus' in v4. He gave himself up on the cross. It should have been me to face God's anger on the cross for my sins. It should have been you being condemned for yours, but Jesus died instead. It took the death of the Son of God for us to be rescued from our drowning in the age of sin.

We don't need swimming lessons, we need a rescue. We don't need someone to meet us half way or even 95% of the way. When we die and are ushered into the presence of a Holy God if we haven't been rescued, it will be clear that the biggest problem for humanity is not cancer or climate change or local government, but our sin.

And the wonder of the gospel, God's gospel, Jesus' gospel, Paul's gospel is that grace is a free gift through the rescue of the Lord Jesus Christ. And it sets us free!

The tragedy of the situation the Galatians were in was that they were being told about something THEY could do to guarantee their right standing with God. That's like being given swimming advice when you need a rescue.

The gospel is about God's 100% rescue. It is 100% God's work and 0% our work.

I wonder if you have received this rescue by repentance and faith in Jesus.

*Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the Cross I cling,*

*Naked come to thee for dress, Helpless look to thee for grace*

*Foul I to the fountain fly, Wash me saviour or I die.*

Well the gospel is the Gospel of God- why would you **dare** to move away from it?  
The gospel is the gospel of Freedom- why would you **want** to move away from it?

Let's move to the third thing about this gospel, and here's the worrying bit.

**3rd) It's a gospel that can be abandoned due to "people pressure". v6-10.**

Galatians has such a different tone from other letters of Paul. Nearly every other letter has some kind of blessing or prayer after the greeting of v1-5, but here he launches straight into a statement of utter incomprehension. Even I Corinthians where he has to tell the church off for a case of incest, there's still a thanksgiving at the start but not here.

v6 I am astonished/ **flabbergasted/ gutted/ horrified**, that you are so quickly (since I left you) deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.

You've become Christians, you are right with God, but now you are trying to guarantee your acceptance with God by your own efforts. What on earth are you doing?

▲ It's the kind of tone a teacher might have when a pupil does something so stupid and so dangerous that they are lost for words - combined with the tone a parent might have when they see their kids going down a route that will only bring them harm. And yet it is even more serious than that, because the gospel is being abandoned so salvation is being abandoned. One commentator describes the tone as white-hot.

Look at verse 6 carefully, when you abandon the **gospel of God**, you abandon the **God of the gospel. verse 6.**

So why would you do that? Why would you abandon **God** and his gospel of **freedom**? The answer is very simple. One word. **People.**

v7. SOME PEOPLE.

People are hugely influential on us. We are all far more controlled by the opinions of others that we would like to admit.

▲ In a thousand schools this week, as the new term begins, children and teenagers will have been doing things that they would never normally do to fit in, to belong:. Why do normally nice kids get involved in shoplifting or lying about their holiday or swearing at passersby? People.

It's nothing new, It's good old fashioned peer pressure, and we all succumbed to it when we were at school. And yet it can happen in Christian circles too. A powerful new leader comes along with what seems to be a powerful new message. How are you doing on the Jewish Law? You haven't been circumcised? You don't keep the Jewish calendar? Oh you're missing out if you don't do these things.

There's a group no doubt with a Jewish background at work in Galatia, and Paul is pretty explicit about them in the book...

4:17

5:7, 9

6:12

They want to be influential, they want to be impressive, they don't want any persecution, and they are pushing the oldest lie in the book. You can do something.

You can contribute. It's appealing. It's nicer on the ears than you are dead, you are enslaved you are condemned. But its not true. If you are spiritually dead, you need spiritual defibrillation. And once you've become a Christian you don't need to do anything extra to stay in the "in group". The right clothes, the right rituals. No you just need Jesus.

It may look appealing but Paul says it's a different gospel. In fact it's no gospel at all. And he's scathing about it. v8-9.

He says I don't care who's preaching it, but if even an angel or an apostle preaches a different message they deserve hell! And that is where they will lead people.

Now this shouldn't freeze us into gospel silence, because we are terrified that every moment we open our mouth we are going to utter a heresy, but it should challenge us to make sure that the message that we preach is the message which Paul preached. It will be good as we look at Galatians to compare our message to his.

Paul comes back to people and popularity in v10. Perhaps people were accusing him of playing to the gallery, of being all things to all men, of moulding his message to suit his audience. But no he renounced that long ago when he started to follow Jesus.

He's living for the audience of one.

So will you live for the audience of ONE? Will you listen to God not man?  
Let me talk to 4 groups as we close....

**1) Teenagers.** You are living in a world of peer pressure. As some of us discussed in the baptism confirmation group, sometimes you have to stick with your principles and take the hit. Live for Jesus. Don't live for the approval of human beings. I've tried that for most of my life and it doesn't satisfy. Don't bend with the crowd, stick with Jesus. Some people might disown you. But others might quietly be impressed- this guy has got backbone, this girl believes something. It's so hard, and you'll get it wrong but remember The Audience of one. God is who is watching and he's more important than your friends.

**2) The unbeliever.** You've been intrigued by Christianity and have been dipping a toe in. But you know you've got mates down the pub who aren't going to like it. Make up your mind now to please the audience of one. God. You're going to do what he wants. There are a million messages out there on the internet to say what you want them to say, but listen to God, in the Bible in Galatians this term. Listen to the God who offers you a rescue, all his work, and don't supplement it with your own efforts, no matter who is telling you.

**3) Preachers.** Some of you preach to congregations, or the kids work, or lead bible studies, or perhaps you are seeking to share the gospel with friends. Will you adapt it according to what is popular, or will you make it your lifelong aim to be faithful to the Bible. Certain things aren't popular to preach or believe these days. But the audience of one. Imagine there's one person in the room who matters. God.

4) **The follower.** We are all followers these days. We follow people on Spotify, Instagram, Facebook, X (if anyone is still there). Who will you follow? Back in Galatia there were influencers, just like there are influencers today. Spiritual ones who are saying this is what to believe, this is how to live.

- Will you listen to the **prosperity gospel**. If you're a proper Christian you'll be healthy wealthy and wise.
- Will you listen to the **repentance free gospel**- I don't need to turn from certain sins. It's popular in the CofE. We're going to see that the gospel of freedom doesn't free you from living a godly life, it enables you to live it!
- Will you listen to a **subtle conservative gospel** that says "we are the soundest Christians around", join us by dotting every i of theology, doing the right church things, wearing the right clothes.
- Or whatever the **next gospel** may be that some very nice and well meaning person shares with you, but that moves you a few inches away from Paul's gospel.

Tweaking the gospel may get you in the cool gang, but it takes you out of God's gang, so DON'T DO IT. Don't abandon Paul's gospel.

**Let's pray.**