

# Gospel power

## Galatians 1:11-17

Embracing the gospel radically changes lives.

### **I. The Nature of the Gospel (Vs 11-12)**

*The gospel was conceived and actualized by God alone.*

- A. Not a Human Authored Message (11-12a)
- B. A God-Breathed Message (12b)

### **II. A Pre-Gospel Life (Vs 13-14)**

*Before we become believers, we are primarily self-absorbed.*

- A. Irrational Dedication (13)
- B. Religious Dedication (14)

### **III. A Post-Gospel Life (Vs 15-16b)**

*Becoming a Christian requires that we give up our self-centered thinking.*

- A. A New Identity (15a)
- B. A New Relationship (15b – 16a)
- C. A New Purpose (16b)

### **IV. Preparation to live the gospel life (Vs 16c-17)**

*In order to fulfill our destinies as God's chosen, we must spend a great deal of time in study and prayer.*

- A. Not Looking For Human Validation (16c-17a)
- B. Looking for God's Validation (17b)

# Gospel power

## Galatians 1:11-17

As we have seen so far, Paul is not much about exchanging pleasantries in this letter. He gets right to the point. On his recent visit to different cities in Galatia, he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ; many people believed the message and gave their lives to Jesus in faith.

No sooner did Paul leave to go back to Antioch, some false teachers came in and tried to distort the gospel message. Paul is like a panicked parent. He talks like a parent scolding a child because he is afraid for his child's safety. Last time we were together, we saw Paul place a curse on these false teachers. He said they should burn in Hell for an eternity. After all, they are threatening the safety and salvation of his children in faith.

This morning, Paul is going to remind these churches about the nature and power of the gospel. And like all good parents or pastors, he uses his faults as an example to illustrate the danger and folly associated with living without the gospel or living with a perverted gospel.

But as all pastors and evangelists know, some people are just not open to receiving the gospel. No matter how passionately we preach, some people will always reject the plain truth of the gospel.

You all remember the church I used to pastor, the one that was so tough? It was so tough that even the visitors were unruly. One month I preached a series of evangelistic messages so congregation members invited their unsaved friends and family. I had just preached one of those Hell, fire, and brimstone sermons. I ended it by saying that Hell would so painful and so horrible that people would gnash and grind their teeth for eternity.

One of these visitors sat smiling and actually started to heckle me. I asked him what was so funny. He said, "I don't have any teeth." I said, "Teeth will be provided."

Look. What Paul wants us to understand is that the gospel has incredible power to change our lives.

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I think that sometimes we don't realize how much power there is in the gospel message. The main idea of this morning's text is this. Embracing the gospel radically changes lives. I think that one of the sure signs of authentically coming to faith in Christ is that our whole lives should shift. There should be a huge difference in our lives as we look back what we were like before we came to know Christ, and after we submitted to Him as our Lord and Savior. If there is not much change, then we should be concerned that we may have embraced a false gospel.

The passage we are studying this morning starts a whole section in which Paul gives an autobiographical account of his faith journey in which he defends his authority to teach the gospel. The section goes through chapter 2 verse 14. Personally, I do not understand why almost every commentator breaks off this section at verse 14 in chapter 2. Personally, I would have ended this section at verse 21, the end of chapter 2 and then started the next section at chapter 3 verse 1. Nevertheless, I will submit to scholars much smarter than I.

### **I. The Nature of the Gospel (Vs 11-12)**

#### ***The gospel was conceived and actualized by God alone.***

Paul describes the nature of the gospel in verses 11-12. Paul is convinced that **the gospel was conceived and actualized by God alone**. In verse 11 through the first half of verse 12, Paul emphasizes that the gospel is not a humanly authored message. We described the gospel message last time. Basically the message says that we as human beings separated ourselves from God by either rejecting or ignoring God and His commands. We separate ourselves from one another by being self-centered. The only way to get back into a right relationship with God is by placing our faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross and by submitting to Him as Lord and Savior. There

is nothing that we can do, we cannot be good enough, nor can we do enough religious works to earn God's love.

### **A. Not a Human Authored Message (11-12a)**

Paul starts out this section getting their attention by addressing them as brothers and sisters. What is it that he wants them to know and be certain of? What human being could ever come up with a story like the gospel? Who could ever invent a salvation plan like God's? God's plan is so unlike our human natures. We sinned. We deserve to suffer through this life and go to Hell for an eternity. We deserve to die. But instead, God comes up with a plan by which He himself takes on human flesh, allows himself to be tortured, humiliated, and executed. He takes on the punishment we deserve and applies the benefits to us.

Can you imagine a judge saying to a murderer, "You are guilty." "I sentence you to death in the electric chair." And then when it comes time for the execution, the judge goes to the jail, writes out a pardon for the murderer, and then goes to sit down in the electric chair. He straps himself in and attaches the electrodes to his head. He looks at the pardoned criminal and says, "I will pay your debt to society. You are free to go." Then he looks at the warden and signals him to pull the switch. The innocent judge dies, the guilty murderer goes free. No human being would ever come up with that story of salvation.

In fact, all human, man-made religions are based on a series of doing things that will make us acceptable to God. All other religions are based on actions and duties that a person has to do in order to be acceptable to God.

This plan was inspired by God himself. And God inspired holy persons all throughout history to write this plan down in the bible. From the very first sentence in Genesis through the very last word in Revelation, God spelled out this incredible plan of salvation.

One holy person that God inspired to write down and participate in this plan of salvation was the apostle Paul. Paul did a lot of religious study. But Paul never learned about how God pulled off this plan through Jesus in any school. In the first phrase in verse 12 Paul says that he did not receive the gospel from any human being. That word *receive* is actually a technical word that refers to formal teaching, formal training, and a transmission of sacred traditions. Paul was not taught the gospel in any school. God spoke directly to Paul.

### **B. A God-Breathed Message (12b)**

That's why in the last phrase of verse 12 Paul makes it clear that the gospel is a God-breathed message. Paul was on his way to the city of Damascus to find Christians, have them arrested, tried, and executed. On the way, the risen Lord Jesus confronted Paul. Keep in mind Jesus is now in his Heavenly form and existence. When he meets Paul, he is so huge that Paul can't even stand in the presence of Jesus. Jesus spoke directly to Paul and explained to him exactly who He was. He was the same Jesus that was crucified for our sins. He was the same Jesus that was the promised messiah of the Jews. He was the same Jesus that Paul was fighting against by hunting down his people and killing them.

That confrontation changed Paul's life forever. In that confrontation with Jesus, Paul learned exactly who Jesus was and how Jesus fulfilled all the Hebrew promises of messiah. Paul had read and studied the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus furthered Paul's education by showing him how Jesus fulfilled the messianic prophecies and how God was now approaching human beings. In his letter to timothy Paul said,

*"<sup>16</sup> All scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right. <sup>17</sup> It is God's way of preparing us in every way, fully equipped for every good thing God wants us to do" (II Timothy 3:16-17/NLT).*

The gospel is a divine message and the bible is a divine book. The gospel was conceived and actualized by God alone.

## II. A Pre-Gospel Life (Vs 13-14)

### ***Before we become believers, we are primarily self-absorbed.***

In verses 13-14, Paul describes his pre-gospel life to us. Sometimes I think we don't realize how evil we really were before coming to Christ and we don't realize how evil our natural tendencies are. The brutal truth is this. Before we become believers, we are primarily self-absorbed. I think that most unbelievers are self-absorbed, selfish, and self-centered. It takes many forms, even forms that appear to be good, noble, and even religious. Even for those of us who have submitted our lives to Christ, we are in a constant battle with our egos and with our temptations to be selfish, self-centered, and self-absorbed.

#### **A. Irrational Dedication (13)**

In verse 13 Paul confesses that he was irrationally dedicated to serving God. The problem was that Paul was really dedicated to himself and he was serving a false god. In my opinion, Paul demonstrates excellent character by pointing out his own faults. From there he would let his listeners think about the truths Paul has laid out and apply them to their own lives.

Paul was committed to being a Jew politically, culturally, and religiously. He would do everything he could do to keep Israel free from the pollution of any other ideas of gods. The problem was that Jesus claimed to be the Jewish messiah. Jesus and his followers claimed that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament laws, prophecies, and covenants. For Paul, that was an outrage. If Jesus were really the promised messiah, then Israel would be free from Rome's rule. In fact, there should have been a war, Israel should have won, and all the nations of the earth should have surrendered to Israel. Jesus should have been on the throne in Jerusalem and all nations of the world should be coming to Jerusalem to pay tribute. The Jews should now be ruling the world if Jesus was truly the messiah.

So Paul hated the fact that some pretender was claiming to be the promised messiah, the king of Israel. In order to keep his nation, his people, his culture, and his religion pure, Paul hunted down Christians all over the world. He would find them where they were, arrest them, jail them, and kill them if possible. The ironic thing about all of it was that Paul thought he was serving God and protecting God's chosen people. When in reality, he was making war against God and killing God's chosen people.

What would have happened to Paul had he died before he repented and gave his life to Jesus? Paul would have died thinking that all sorts of honors and rewards were waiting for him in Heaven, only to hear Jesus say to him, "Depart to Hell you evil one. You neither served God nor knew God because I am God."

When I see these poor misguided suicide bombers kill themselves thinking they are honoring God, I feel sorry for them. They think that God is waiting for them in Heaven with all sorts of honors and rewards. Instead, they are going to find an eternity of sorrow and suffering. Whenever we embrace a religion in which we feel the need to work for our salvation, we will end up with an irrational dedication. In the history of humankind, Jews murdered people thinking they were serving God, Christians murdered people thinking they were serving God, and now Muslims are killing people thinking they are serving God. This type of attitude comes from being self-absorbed with one's circumstances in life.

I really don't care what Muslims, Jews, or other religions do. I am a Christian pastor. And so I will speak to us. Racism is an irrational dedication to misguided thinking. It is impossible to identify ourselves as Christians if we are prejudiced in any way. Ignoring the poor among us is irrational dedication to our social status. When we are self-centered, there is no way in which we can claim to be serving and worshipping the God of the bible.

#### **B. Religious Dedication (14)**

Paul admitted that he was prejudiced and blinded by his self-absorption and self-centeredness. In verse 14 he confesses to being obsessed by religious dedication. We said this before. Paul was on the fast track. He was a member of the most prestigious religious and political sect of Judaism. He was a Pharisee. Not only was he a member of this sect, he was educated at the best school under the most prestigious rabbi of the time. He was headed for the top: religiously, politically, and socially. He was the rising star in Judaism.

The problem with being religious is that we easily get attached to the rules and become self-righteous. The religion in Paul's day found 613 laws in the Hebrew Scriptures. There were 365 prohibitions, "Thou shalt nots," and 248 positive commands, "Thou shalt." Paul made sure that he kept all the laws. However, it's possible to keep the law and have nothing to do with God at all.

Let me give you an example from Christianity. Let's say that we come to church every Sunday and come to Wednesday evening prayer meeting every week. Further, let's say that we not only give 10% of our money to God, we give 20% of our income to church each week. And to top it off, we don't steal or kill anyone during the week. We pretty much mind our own business. And each week we come to church thinking that we are pretty good with God.

The point is that we can do all these things because they make us feel good and they make us feel like we are holy. In fact, we could be doing all those things and have no relationship with God at all.

It is possible to be very religious and be gossiping about people. We may not kill anyone, but we may be talking bad about our husbands or wives. We may secretly think we are better than other people. I am going to say this for perhaps the thousandth time, yea maybe even the millionth. Christianity is not a religion. It is all about being in a relationship with God and people. Jesus summed up these 613 plus laws by saying,

*"<sup>37</sup> Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. <sup>38</sup> This is the first and greatest commandment. <sup>39</sup> And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:37-39/NIV).*

Anybody who is really religious is usually very self-centered and self-absorbed. People who love God also love other people. The truth that we all have to face is that before we become believers, we are primarily self-absorbed. If you run into people who think they are pretty good, then you can be absolutely sure that they are not Christian. Thinking that we are pretty good is a clear sign that we are judging ourselves according to our own standards.

When Jesus told this parable, he was talking to people like Paul before he met Jesus in person. And Jesus tells this parable to all who don't know him, yet think they are good:

<sup>9</sup> Then Jesus told this story to some who had great self-confidence and scorned everyone else: <sup>10</sup> "Two men went to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a dishonest tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The proud Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: 'I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like everyone else, especially like that tax collector over there! For I never cheat, I don't sin, I don't commit adultery, <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.'

*<sup>13</sup> "But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to Heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, 'O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.' <sup>14</sup> I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For the proud will be humbled, but the humble will be honored" (Luke 18:9-14/NLT).*

### **III. A Post-Gospel Life (Vs 15-16b)**

#### ***Becoming a Christian requires that we give up our self-centered thinking.***

Once Paul came to meet the risen Jesus, he no longer thought of himself as good in any way. In verse 15 through the middle of verse 16 Paul describes his post-gospel life. Paul is going to dramatically make this point in chapter 2. Becoming a Christian requires that we give up our self-centered thinking. In fact, Paul will say that we have to put our egos to death. In other words, we need to die to ourselves and start to identify with God's thoughts and God's agenda. Jesus put it this way,

<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus said to the disciples, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must put aside your selfish ambition, shoulder your cross, and follow me" (Matthew 16:24/NLT).

The apostle Paul will state it like this in chapter 2,

<sup>20</sup> I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20).

### **A. A New Identity (15a)**

Part of surrendering to God in faith is receiving a new identity based on the act of adoption described in the first half of verse 15. The wording is very interesting here. The word "*Pharisee*" meant the separated ones. And what that meant was that these religious Jews set themselves apart from common Jews and certainly would not even come close to having any sort of contact with non-Jews. They set themselves apart by living according to the exact letter of the law, reading and studying the bible intensely, and doing all sorts of good works. But the key is that they set themselves apart as righteous and holy.

But here in verse 15 Paul makes it clear that the only way to be truly set apart is if God chooses us and calls us to be part of his chosen family. And God does not choose us because we are good, clever, holy or intelligent. Everyone who is an authentic Christian will tell you that it is only by the grace of God and his leading that we are able to call ourselves Christians. Paul realized that if Jesus had not chosen to meet him face to face on the plain outside of Damascus, Paul would have kept on going about his religious fanaticism, thinking that he was right with God when in reality he was headed for Hell.

All of us who have thought about our being adopted into God's family realize how lucky we are. If Jesus had not come to meet me and if the Holy Spirit did not enlighten me, there is no way I would have come to Christ. I would still be lost, doing things my own way, and thinking I was good and upright. But thank God, there was a time when I surrendered my life and my will to God. And he adopted me into his family and now calls me son. It doesn't matter where you came from, if you have given your life to Jesus in faith, you are now a child of God. You are one of God's chosen children. And we are brothers and sisters in the royal family. It doesn't matter if you came from a very poor and abusive earthly family. You are now a child of God's family. You have to let go of the past hurts and disappointments. It doesn't matter if you came from a very rich and very advantaged situation. You have to let go of that as well. Nobody has an advantage or disadvantage in God's family. We all have to let go of our past and embrace our new identities as children of God. Our new identities are God's chosen children. We are the ones that God has set apart and called together to be a family. That is what church is.

### **B. A New Relationship (15b – 16a)**

In the last phrase of verse 15 and the first half of verse 16 we find ourselves in a new relationship. This is an amazing concept. Not only does God reveal Jesus to us, he reveals Jesus in us. In order for us to be Christians, God must first reveal to us who Jesus is. He is our Lord and Savior. When we become Christians, we are actually inviting Jesus to come into our lives and live in us. God then uses us as visual aids to the world in which He demonstrates his power and love through us. We become so intimately related with Jesus that we should start to act like Him. The love relationship between Jesus and us should spill out onto those around us. That is quite an intense relationship.

### **C. A New Purpose (16b)**

And with our new identity and new relationship comes a new purpose in life as described in next sentence of verse 16. Paul was called to preach the gospel to the gentiles. I want us to just think about this for a moment. Before meeting Jesus, Paul hated gentiles. He was as racist and elitist as one could be. These were the people he hated the most. He would have been much more comfortable talking with other intellectuals and other religious Jews. He knew the ways, customs and

language. However, God sent him way out of his comfort zone. God changed his heart totally. God commissioned him and empowered him to preach to the people he once despised. And now he has an incredible love and burden for them.

Listen. Since we are God's children, we represent Him here on earth. We are part of His royal family. We are His ambassadors. We have been given not only the privilege of bringing salvation to the lost, we have been given the responsibility of bringing the lost to salvation. It is God who brought us to salvation. It is God who made us part of his family. It is God who planned out all sorts of good works for us to do. He will empower us to do them and he will complete the good work he started in each one of us. God does everything, and in his crazy world, he will reward us for it. But in order to accomplish all these good works, we have to first humble ourselves and empty ourselves of any sense of ego, pride, and self-absorption. And that's why becoming a Christian requires that we give up our self-centered thinking.

## **IV. Preparation to live the gospel life (Vs 16c-17)**

***In order to fulfill our destinies as God's chosen, we must spend a great deal of time in study and prayer.***

Being a Christian is to start thinking God's thoughts. We can only do this through a rich devotional life. In the last phrase of verse 16 through verse 17 we see Paul's preparation to live the gospel life. For us that means **in order to fulfill our destinies as God's chosen, we must spend a great deal of time in study and prayer.**

### **A. Not Looking For Human Validation (16c-17a)**

In Paul's pre-conversion days, it was important for him to be held in high esteem by his peers and his elders. Paul wanted to get to the top and wanted to be recognized as such. However, after meeting Jesus, he no longer looked for human validation as he describes it in the last phrase of verse 16 and the first phrase in verse 17. He didn't go look for a famous rabbi, and he didn't go to Jerusalem to look up the 12 apostles.

This is especially hard for most of us. We grow up wanting to be popular. We want to be accepted by our peers. We want to be liked. And so we learn very early on how to be people-pleasers. We learn to please our parents, our friends, and people who can get us into the right groups and places. At work we learn how to please our bosses and play nice with the other workers.

However, if we really choose to live our lives for Christ, we will soon find out that we are very out of step with most people in our society. I think that for a great deal of our Christian life, we try to live in both worlds. We try to be accepted and still be Christian. But as we grow and mature, we find it more and more difficult to be part of the crowd. I'm not giving us permission to be obnoxious or judgmental. What I am saying is that as we fall more and more in love with God, the more detached we become from the things of this world. And because unbelievers are so attached to the things of this world, we tend to lose common interests. We have to constantly decide not to look for human validation.

### **B. Looking for God's Validation (17b)**

Instead, we need to look for God's validation as described in the second half of verse 17. Paul needed to get away and try to make sense out of this whole event of meeting the risen Lord Jesus. Meeting Jesus and recognizing Him as Savior, Lord, and God changed absolutely everything in Paul's life.

There is a lot of discussion and debate as to where Paul went. Locating Arabia is difficult. Some people think that it is up by Damascus. It could be anywhere in modern day Saudi Arabia. But let's think about this. Moses met God at the burning bush at Mt. Horeb. Moses received the law from God at Mt. Sinai. These are located on the Sinai Peninsula and were considered part of Arabia. I think what Paul did was go to a secluded place where he could be alone with God. He had to go back over

his Hebrew bible and now read it knowing that Jesus was the promised messiah. He had to know the bible in a new way.

For us, that means that if we want to live successful Christian lives, we need to seek God's validation in our prayer time. We need to get alone with God, study our bibles, pray, meditate, and listen for God's direction. There are no short cuts. Part of living healthy, authentic, successful Christian lives mean that we spend time alone with God.

Paul understood that in order to fulfill our destinies as God's chosen; we must spend a great deal of time in study and prayer. In order to have a good relationship with God, we must learn to appreciate all that He has done for us. We need to give up all our egotistical, worldly, and self-centered thinking. In baptism we symbolize our dying to our old way of life when we go under the water. When we come up out of the water, we symbolize our new life in Christ. New life in Christ means that we learn to think and act in radically new ways. In other words embracing the gospel will radically change our lives.

If the change is not radical, then perhaps we are not authentic Christians. Listen to how Billy Graham describes the change:

*"No man can be said to be truly converted to Christ who has not bent his will to Christ. He may give intellectual assent to the claims of Christ and may have had emotional religious experiences; however, he is not truly converted until he has surrendered his will to Christ as Lord, Savior, and Master."*

We are not dealing with some clever stories of philosophies that have been created by human beings. We are dealing with the very words of God. The gospel has incredible power to change our lives if we will just surrender our lives in faith to Christ.