

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI

Pastor Mark Gartner

Sermon for Pentecost 2 -- June 3rd and 6th, 2010

Galatians 1:1-10

“Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the brothers with me, To the churches in Galatia:

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.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.”

Dear brothers and sisters who are led by God's love to thank God with your lives and actions. Amen

For more than a month now we have been listening to the executives from BP as they have tried to tell us what exactly is happening to a broken oil pipe miles below the water's surface. BP tells us so many gallons of oil are spewing out each day and experts tell us completely different numbers. BP tells us this is why this great disaster happened and others beg to differ and come up with completely different stories and circumstance to who's to blame for this horrific mess. I have to admit and most likely you do too, it can be frustrating that it is so often so difficult to find out what the truth really is. Most of the time we never find out for sure. Sometimes because people flat-out lie; sometimes because people speak from ignorance; sometimes because people intentionally craft their words so that they can be understood pretty much however you want to understand them. Politics gets the bad rap, but it's not only in politics. It's everywhere. I imagine you run into it even in your own home that it sometimes seems almost impossible to find out what the truth really is.

The opinion we seem to be developing is that in many cases, it really doesn't matter what the truth is. Just like beauty, truth is in the eye of the beholder. Truth is however you see things from your own perspective. And there's no area where that kind of thinking has deeper roots than in religion. Hindu, Muslim, Mormon, Christian—they're all just different perspectives on the same God and they all lead to the same place. Aren't we all God's children? Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—they all talk about Jesus, don't they? And isn't that all that matters?

Some say, Isn't it rather arrogant, for any one of those church bodies to say that they have it right? Or, perhaps more to the point, for any one church to maintain that any other church has it wrong? It certainly would be arrogant if truth really were in the eye of the beholder. If the truth is my perspective on how things should be, then no one has the right to say that I am wrong—because they're not me. If truth is in the eye of the beholder, then it doesn't matter whether you join yourself with the Hindus or Muslims or Mormons or Catholics or Methodists or Episcopalians. Everyone has the truth as long as they believe it. Even when their truth contradicts someone else's truth they are still both right.

That's a prevalent way of thinking in this twenty-first century world. And it rubs off on us. But it's blasphemy to God. According to God, truth isn't determined by what a person believes, it's not determined by what a person thinks it should be, but it's determined by what God says it is. Whether a person believes it or not is beside the point. To a religious environment that says, If it feels right, it must be... Listen to what your heart is saying... Believe whatever you want as long as you don't tell anyone they're wrong. God says, The truth isn't what you think it is, the truth is what I say it is. And God clearly says what it is in the Bible. Unmistakably

clearly, not in a confusing way that can be rightfully interpreted in a hundred different ways. God is smarter than that. He has revealed his truth clearly because he wants you to know it clearly and believe it firmly, because it's through the truth that he saves you. Jesus said it this way, **"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."**

I hope that keeping those words of Jesus in mind will help us to understand the passion in Paul's words to the churches of Galatia—to understand why he should speak so strongly against those who would pervert the gospel of Christ. Why he should say that even if an angel from heaven; or even the apostle Paul himself; or even your beloved pastor or church body; should pervert the truth of God it would be better for that person or angel to go to hell forever. God is protective of his saving truth for good reason, because it's the truth that saves. Pervert the truth and at best you have a half-truth—and even the devil uses half-truths. If you lose the truth then you lose salvation. It's because eternal lives are on the line that God says—God says—twice—if anyone perverts the gospel of Christ, **"Let him be eternally condemned!"** Our theme will draw on this picture of the truth:

Sermon Theme: God Is Protective Of His Saving Truth

- 1. He is angry when it is perverted**
- 2. He is pleased when it is preserved**

1. He is angry when it is perverted

From the intensity and frankness of Paul's words one would probably conclude that the gospel was being perverted pretty bad among the Galatian churches. And it was! But part of the problem was that people hadn't seen it as something bad. The false doctrine among them was treated as no big deal. After all, people weren't coming in from outside the church and saying, We have a new god to introduce to you besides Jesus. No, the false teaching came from people inside the church, and they still called Jesus their Savior. After all, it wasn't a matter of smooth-talkers promoting same-sex marriages or encouraging the acceptance of blatantly sinful behavior. It was far less attention-getting, much more harmless-looking than anything like that. It was something about which it would be much easier to say, Does it really matter? Do we really have to be so dogmatic about everything?

Jesus! they would say, Jesus is our Savior! We're saved through faith in Jesus! But you've got to keep doing the Old Testament ceremonies, too, of course. Then you are saved. It sounds a lot like the gospel. They talk about Jesus saving us. But that's a different gospel, Paul wrote. In fact, it's not the gospel at all. By adding even one requirement to salvation you've taken credit for your salvation from Christ and given it to yourself. And along with the credit you run the risk of taking your trust for salvation from Christ and putting it in yourself. To the person to says, Salvation is from Jesus, but all you have to do is (fill in the blank), God says, **"Let him be eternally condemned!"**

God is angry when his saving truth is perverted at all, even if it doesn't seem like a big deal to us. And the reason for his anger is righteous and good: First of all, it's his truth, not ours. It's not determined by our feelings but by his Word. Second of all, he reveals the truth to us in order to save us. Eternal lives are on the line. To change the truth is to face the real danger of losing salvation through the truth. God is protective of his saving truth. And he is angry when it is perverted, because he loves you. He doesn't want you to lose the truth and be eternally condemned.

2. He is pleased when it is preserved

What pleases God is when his saving truth is preserved. That doesn't mean bottled up and put on a shelf like a fine bottle of wine that you enjoy bragging about but never drink. God's saving truth is preserved when it's believed. God's saving truth is preserved when it comes off the pages of the Bible and into your heart. It's preserved when you base your faith not on what you feel, not on what is popular, not on what somebody else tells you to believe, but on what God reveals to you in the Bible because you know what God says in the Bible.

Believing what God says means knowing what God says. That's one of the reasons we're here right now: to listen to what God says so that we can know his truth. And that's the reason for the never-ending encouragements to come to Sunday School and Bible Class and to weeknight Bible classes and to have devotions at home and to know your Bible better than you know the primetime television lineup. The goal of the encouragements is not to have impressive congregational statistics, the goal is to know what God says. The goal is to be able to identify false teachings. The goal is to be able to explain to people why you believe what you believe. The goal is to be able to echo your pastor's, Amen, at the end of the sermon because you know from the Bible that what he said was indeed true. The goal is know and not doubt that even in the worst of times you have **“Grace and peace 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.”**

Or to sum it all up, the goal of knowing, and thus believing, and thus preserving God's truth is your salvation, so that through thick and thin, whether you're feeling good or feeling rotten, whether you can see God's love all over your life or nowhere but the Bible, you can say, My God and he alone has rescued me from this present evil age. He has saved me. I am his. There is nothing that pleases God more than that you believe his truth, because it is through that truth that he saves you from your sin and from this sinful world.

Sociologists and philosophers tell us we're in a postmodern era. They document how people's perception of the truth is changing in this era. Truth has become subjective. That is, what I perceive to be true is true for me. If someone else's perception is different, well, then that's true for them. I can see that trend also in churches, when doctrine is based not on the Bible but on what people want to hear, when personal feelings trump biblical truths. I see it in my own heart, when my sinful nature causes me to brush away those words of God that show me guilty of my sin, or when I think I know a better way to get things done by going around God's Word, or when I expect proof of God's love in the way I feel or the way I'm treated rather than in God's promises. And I see it in not just in myself.

God surely has been gracious to us. We're guilty of ignoring his truth; we're guilty of perverting his truth to our liking; we're guilty of letting it lie on our shelves. But God has been gracious to us. He has not taken his truth away. He has continued to bring us back to his truth by the means of his truth; he has continued to forgive our sins and strengthen our trust in him by means of that same truth. It's his truth—with Christ in the center—that saves. His word is the truth. Through that truth he saves. God is pleased when his word brings that result. Amen.