

Bob Young
1108 Ono Ct
McAlester, OK 74501
918.470.0421

www.bobyoungresources.com
bro.bobyoung@yahoo.com

**2010 Pan American Lectureship
Tegucigalpa, Honduras
Tidings from God's Mountain: Studies in Galatians
Session #1**

Introduction

The book of Galatians is not well known; some preachers have considered it “not preach-able”. I am glad I have been asked to teach it and not to preach it. It is often packaged with Romans, and in many college-level Bible classes, the professor never get to it or treats it only briefly and superficially. A study of church history reveals the importance of Galatians in the Reformation. Jerry Jones: “Galatians teaches what I had always hoped is true.”

Connecting Galatians and mission work

Galatians is likely the first “missionary letter.” This statement depends on dating Galatians before First Thessalonians. It is a letter written by a missionary to a collection of new churches and fledgling Christians who had recently left their previous religion and come to Christ. The missionary aspect of Galatians is not prominent in the majority of commentaries.

The theme for PAL 2010 is “Messages from the King’s Mountain”. Galatians refers to two mountains. The “mountainous” section summarizes the book. When we study and analyze mission work, there are two options: Sinai and Jerusalem. We will flesh out this comparison as we study the book of Galatians this week. Do we do mission work from Sinai or Jerusalem? The answer may surprise you.

To work with this question, we will work with the text, but this is not a textual study that will leave you thinking, “Wow, I understand every verse in Galatians now.” To study all 149 verses, about 50 verses per class session, requires one verse per minute. That is not the task as I understand it.

The Book of Galatians

Content

There are many outlines of Galatians available in commentaries and study guides. A simple outline uses three two-chapter sections. In general, the first section (chapters 1-2) is personal or autobiographical, the second (chapters 3-4) doctrinal, the third (chapters 5-6) practical. There are several repeated concepts in Galatians. Galatians contrasts faith and the law, the law and the promise, freedom and slavery, sonship and slavery, liberty and license, the spirit and the flesh, the genuine gospel and a false version of the gospel. One outline which reflects several of these dynamics is the apostle of liberty, the doctrine of liberty, and the life of liberty.

Familiar verses

There are many familiar passages in Galatians: 1:6-9; 2:20; 3:26-27; 5:16-23; 6:1-2; 6:7-10; 6:14. You can cite several others that are often quoted and frequently memorized.

Jewish Backgrounds

We must consider the social and political background of the first century. Rome was in control. Jesus had promised a newness that had not materialized from the Jewish viewpoint. The Jewish people were still under foreign occupation, as they had been since 586 BC and before: Assyrians, Babylonians, Medo-Persians, Greeks, Romans. The Jews wanted to be free, live without outside interference. What was not clear was that Christianity, a new version of Judaism, was the path to that goal.

The tensions of Judaism: are reflected in the differing emphases between the prophetic school of thought and the priestly school of thought. The prophetic tradition exalted the weak and helpless, the poor, forgotten, rejected and outcasts. The prophet tradition emphasized inward sincerity more than outward conformity. The prophetic tradition criticized injustice and hypocrisy. The prophetic tradition emphasized the possibility of changing the world.

Out of this history at least four distinct groups had developed in Judaism. First, the Zealots were in favor of confronting Rome; they were revolutionaries. God will give us the power to overcome if we will be brave like David. Second, the Herodians, supporters of the puppet ruler, Herod, and joined by the Sadducees, thought the Zealots were wrong and stupid. We cannot resist Rome. Revolution would be suicide. We should play along, fit in, cooperate, and work within the system. Third, the Essenes thought both the Zealots and Herodians had failed to see the truth. We must isolate ourselves from this system, leave the corrupt religious and political systems, and create an alternative society. Fourth, the Pharisees had a yet a different view. God would bless us if we would just be purer, more obedient, and more rigorous. There is too much sin and not enough piety. We need more (human) righteousness. Against this Jewish background, one must ask which of these four Jewish schools of thought predominated among the Galatians. What kind of Jews were the Galatian Judaizers? I believe they were primarily from the Pharisee point of view.

Biblical Backgrounds

Acts 13-16. First, (13-14) the Antioch church sends Paul and Barnabas on what we know as the first journey. They go to Cyprus, Perga of Pamphilia, then inland to Antioch of Pisidia, then to Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe. They then retrace their steps and return to Antioch. The next step (15) is the trip to Jerusalem to settle some questions concerning how to integrate Gentiles into a church that had previously been totally and exclusively Jewish. Finally, (16) we read of another visit to these churches on the beginning of what we know as the second missionary journey.

These Biblical Backgrounds help us understand the Galatian churches and Paul's relationship with them

We see some of Paul's experience with these churches by reviewing his first missionary journey. A review also helps us understand why the gospel was being perverted and misunderstood. There are different classes of people to whom the gospel goes in the early chapters of the book of Acts. We see the Jews in Acts 2-7 (including some proselytes?); we see the Samaritans (half-breed Jews) in Acts 8. We meet a Gentile who is a proselyte to Judaism in Acts 8. We meet a God-fearing Gentile in Acts 10. The third class of Gentiles was the pagan, polytheistic Gentiles to whom Paul turned in Acts 13:46. We meet them in Acts 14:11-13, and one may also think ahead to Acts 17 and Mars Hill. The churches of Galatia were formed from a combination of these groups of people.

Themes

An analysis of the book of Galatians as a missionary book suggests that three threads run through the book of Galatians. Paul wants to set forth (1) the **essence** of the gospel, (2) the **exigencies** of the gospel, and (3) an **example** of the gospel applied. These might be described as a **definition of the gospel, the demands of the gospel, and a demonstration of the gospel**. These three concepts we will use to outline and study the book of Galatians in the three days.

Paul defines the gospel by his own experience as he moved from Judaism to Christianity. He also defines the gospel by contrasting the nature of the gospel of faith with the nature of the law. Next, he addresses two extremes regarding the demands of the gospel. One is that it is possible to preach a gospel that demands too much. To demand that Christians keep the law, to demand that the practices of Judaism be incorporated into the Christian life is to deny the liberty that is in Christ. A second is that it is possible to preach a gospel that demands too little. The result of this extreme is that the gospel is applied poorly and lives are little changed—Paul’s third concern. The importance of these three basic concepts is set forth in several “too much/too little” comparisons, most of which appear in the last third of the book: law, freedom, slavery, Holy Spirit, cross.

The Essence of the Gospel: God Has a Plan for the World

Galatians outlines God’s plan for the world. We could know from OT and NT that God has a plan, but the revolutionary nature of that plan is unfolded in Galatians. This makes Galatians a mission book. We should have known that—it is written in the early days of the initial mission movements of the early church, and it addresses a major mission problem.

The problem is the establishment of new churches outside the familiar context and confines of Jerusalem and Judea. The gospel is expanding to new geographic areas and new cultures in the establishment of the churches of eastern Asia Minor in the Roman province of Galatia.

Those who are familiar with Galatians know it is unique, because it is addressed to multiple churches. Some have thought it is not addressed to the new converts as much as to the “old guys” who should have been mature in Christ but had their hang-ups. This brings up an interesting question: Were the Judaizing teachers new converts? How long had they been Christians?

Defining the Gospel: What is the Essence of the Gospel?

What is the essence of the gospel? What is essential? A first step toward effective mission work is to understand and reflect the essence of the gospel. We must get the right gospel and we must get the gospel right. The good news must be good news and not bad news. Misunderstanding the essence of the gospel leads us to an experience parallel to Goldilocks. Some mission work presents a “too hard” gospel. Some mission work presents a “too easy” gospel. It is not easy to understand the “just right” gospel. The problem in Galatia, and thus the problem Paul addresses is that of making the gospel and the Christian life harder than it should be. In an interesting use of terms, he describes a non-gospel gospel, an impossible version characterized by controlling and demanding.

The “too hard” version of the gospel

The “too hard” version of the gospel in Galatia (the non-gospel gospel) was probably the result of the Pharisaic understanding of the experience of Judaism. There was a desire to be as pure as possible. Perhaps those who develop a demanding gospel are trying to make the Christian life easier for new converts. If I carefully define for you the exact nature of the Christian life in every aspect of life, then you have no decisions to make. There is an apparent paradox in this approach, for it seems to have the opposite effect of what it actually has. If I describe in detail the requirements through a kind of legalism and letter of the law approach to the gospel, I make it easy for a new Christian to know what to do and how to measure life. The problem for Paul, and for us, is that this is the opposite of the intent and result of the gospel.

Mission work must address the tendency to develop artificial hurdles. Artificial hurdles fail to reflect God’s plan. Artificial hurdles distract workers and converts from the real mission of Christ in the world.

Mission work demands understanding God's plan. Without understanding God's plan, we will not understand the mission correctly. God's plan is by grace, not by our actions or success in keeping the "law". God's plan depends on God. Galatians thus depends on understanding the nature of God.

Paul Defines the Gospel through his Own Experience

Paul addresses the problem of a misunderstood gospel, a "too hard" gospel, through his own experience. His Jewish roots as a Pharisee had caused him to think in parallel ways. He had come to understand the gospel of Christ through his own encounter and experiences. Galatians depends on understanding the "how" of God's plan for the world. This is an adequate summary of chapters 1-2 and may be seen as a possible theme for the book. "What is the 'how' of God's plan for the world?" This theme may be reflected in a phrase which is repeated in the three sections of the book (2:15-16, 3:16ff, 5:13-16).

Paul observes that the gospel operates as God calls individuals irrespective of personal approval. Paul was called by God. The gospel first operates independently and then is recognized by its fruits or results. The gospel does not find fulfillment by observing the law. Paul observes that the gospel is consistent with the promise which provides an understanding of the real purpose of the law. The gospel is not designed to encourage license but to bring true liberty in Christ.

What happens when missions is done "our way" rather than "God's way"

In Galatians, we find a group who are more interested in protecting their own interests and understandings than in the salvation of people. The Judaizers (Jewish Christians who believed the Law of Moses should be kept by Gentile Christians) were primarily concerned with their Judaic traditions. Paul calls this a different gospel, saying it is not even of the same type. This is the gospel of "too much". It is a gospel of high demands—demands inconsistent with the nature and intent of the gospel.

Applications

This is a real "mission" book—the story of the expansion of the gospel to a mission field. People were converted to Christ, but because of their background and past religion, they inadvertently changed the message for the next round of converts. What did they do? Did they make things too easy, lower the standards? No, they found assurance in legalism, the syncretism which combined previous religion and the new religion of Christianity.

Why does Paul spend so much time autobiographically? Because they were going over the same path he had traversed. He had the same questions, the same concerns, the same struggles. He had wrestled with the same things. Perfection based on all kinds of human measurements (Phil. 3). He had wrestled with what message he would take, and to whom he would take it. He shares his experience to help them understand that he knew their concerns, and that he knew what he was going to write about.

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The Demands of the Gospel

The gospel properly understood and properly applied will bring the Christian into a healthy relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The gospel reflects a right approach to God. This demands that we get the core message right, thus Paul's contrast of faith and law, law and promise, law and gospel. Paul stands squarely in the Jewish prophetic tradition with his response.

Two Approaches to God

An interesting way to introduce this concept is go back to the two trees in the garden.¹ Many of our sermons, and much of our evangelism and mission work, tend to be built on the assumption that you can be a successful Christian if you just try hard enough. We present something to be understood, done, accomplished.... Try harder, moralizing, get serious... Such is biblically flawed, and Paul writes Galatians to challenge that misunderstanding.

Many sermons are built on the idea of getting Christians to put their noses into the Bible a little deeper (so far so good). But people "nose out" different things—

- Charismatic: heal the sick, cast out demons, miracles, Holy Spirit, tongue-speaking
- Social justice: feeding the poor, helping the oppressed, loving sinners
- Pietistic: holy living, rejection of world
- Evangelistic: how to be saved and save others
- Doctrinal correctness: what to believe [contemplative]
- Incarnational

The result is that few smell the fragrance of the whole of Jesus' life.

Consider Genesis 1-3. There were two trees in the Garden; the same trees continue to play a role throughout scripture: tree of knowledge of good and evil, tree of life.

→The tree of the knowledge of good and evil says make your own decisions, determine for yourself what is right and wrong, be self-sufficient, be self-determining.

→→The tree of life represents receiving the uncreated life of God into one's self, to be indwelt, guided, loved, and led. These are two very different options.

→The tree of the knowledge of good and evil says try to do good, avoid evil; get things right, know the boundaries, live on the edge, legalism.

→→The tree of the knowledge of life says let the life of God flow within you, through you, yield to God's instincts, energy.

¹ I am indebted to Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *The Jesus Manifesto*, for the basic concepts (and some of the wording) which are presented in this section.

→The tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents the desire to define intellectually good and evil, right and wrong, to know good from evil, to try to do good.

→→The tree of life says live by the life of God, which is goodness itself. The desire to define and to know goodness as the ultimate goal of life is the counterfeit of living by the tree of life.

Now the difficulty with sermons (and mission work) is that it makes us think that we can find the real knowledge of good and evil. Many preachers and missionaries turn the Bible into a form of the knowledge of good and evil. The Bible is raw material for learning how to gain control of life, how to live life, to make life understandable, more predictable. This is a grievous misuse of the Bible. This results in Christians who try to be Christians by knowledge and toeing the line.

What Does God Want—the Demands of the Gospel

Jesus did not misuse the Bible to gain control of life. The Bible is a way to get to know the Father better, connect with genuine life, and learn how to live life devoted to our mission and God's purpose.

Consider Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees. They saw things differently. Christianity is not fundamentally about ethics and morality. Christianity can never be understood or lived with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Spirituality and morality are two different things. Too many Christians are listening to too many preachers preaching too many sermons which encourage us to try to eat from the wrong tree.

Christians are not mistaken in condemning immorality, but are mistaken in their approach. The proper reaction is not to run as hard as possible in the opposite direction. The idea that Christians must deal with the world by keeping it at arm's length is flawed (remember the Essenes). This is depending on the knowledge of good and evil. Living by the tree of life is the antidote. Christ had compassion on the brokenhearted and rejected. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil leads to the wrong faith, or at least a twisted version of faith. The tree of life empowers us to go into godless world as servants of its unacknowledged Lord.

What the Bible says is important, but it is important because it shows us the person of God and Jesus. We may be people of the book; we may do even better to become people occupied with a person. Truth is ultimately a person, Jesus. The book is truth because Jesus is truth, and the book contains the words of Jesus. Do not stop short. Christianity is not about following a book, but about following a person in life. The map leads us to Jesus.

This illustrates the problem of forgetting the core message, or of replacing the core message with a substitute message. Mission work not only demands that we have something to say, but that we get the right message and the message right. One cannot be a missionary without having something to say, but does what we typically say make sense?

Effective mission work depends on understanding and preaching the true gospel, not perversions or misdirection plays. Only the true gospel can bring people to continuing saving relationship with Christ: saved by the grace of the promise, and saved by the grace of Christ. At this point we must ask ourselves, "Missions by whose power?"

Paul Argues for a "Just Right" Gospel

Paul uses a series of arguments to show the consistency, practicality, importance, of the gospel of grace, always a part of the plan of God (chapters 3-4).

There are six sections. I outline it as five arguments plus an allegory. Consider this schematic outline of the section. Paul presents five arguments followed by an illustration.

Personal experience, 3:1-5

 Old Testament-Promise anticipated, 3:6-14

 Law—purpose was to point to the promised one, promise confirmed, 3:15-29

 New Testament—The promise realized, 4:1-11

Personal relationship, 4:12-20

Allegory, 4:21-31

Paul makes these points: the Galatians' conversion was by faith, the promise was by faith, the purpose of the law points to the fulfilled faith, faith is demonstrated in sonship, and faith is being lived out in the relationship between Paul and the Galatians.

The Allegory of 4:21-31

What remains in our treatment of this section is to make sense of the allegory and to understand how it contributes to Paul's argument about a proper definition of the gospel and the demands of the gospel. In our introduction, we called this the "mountainous" section of Galatians.

Paul's argument is that the gospel of salvation is through faith by grace. His final argument is an allegory. An allegory takes a historical event and presents it as the vehicle to illustrate and to carry a parallel present truth. It is similar to the type and antitype analogies in the book of Hebrews. This is the only allegory in the New Testament.

An allegory does not prove the truth of a point. This allegory, which uses the Abraham and Sarah story, is Paul's way of illustrating his teaching. One can easily allegorize or spiritualize a text and be wrong about what the text says or means. Building an allegory does not prove the truth of Paul's position. It illustrates it, and says that God has operated in the same way previously. When we study church history, we learn that the early church went into apostasy by allegorizing and proof-texting their religion with unrelated passages. Untold errors can be taught while quoting the Bible. Allegory is not a way to discover truth. Only divinely inspired allegories can be considered an authoritative application.

One can describe an allegory as an extended metaphor. It is not a word or phrase, it uses an entire story. Allegories were developed about the 6th c. BC to avoid anthropomorphisms and crude literalisms. These were considered offensive to the Greek mind.

Paul's use of the story has three sections: the facts of the story, an interpretation of the story, and the contemporary application of the story. **First**, the story is set forth briefly in 4:21-23. The focus is on the different origins of the sons. One was naturally born, one was by promise. There could be other contrasts noted, but they are not the point of Paul's allegory. **Second**, Paul interprets the facts of the allegory by outlining the figurative meanings (4:24-27). The two women represent two covenants. The Sinai covenant (represented by Hagar) bears children who will be slaves. Paul expands the first half of the interpretation by connecting Hagar to the literal Mount Sinai corresponding to the present city of Jerusalem. This connection appears to depend upon Mt. Sinai as a past center of Judaism and Jerusalem as the current center of Judaism. **Finally**, Paul observes that the earthly Jerusalem experiences slavery and her children.

The connections can be set forth in a chart:

Hagar (slave)	Sarah (free)
Ishmael (origin-natural, fleshly)	Isaac (origin-promise, Spirit)
Old Covenant	New Covenant
Law	Promise/Gospel/faith/grace
Sinai, physical Jerusalem, Judaism	Jerusalem above, Christianity
Slavery and no inheritance	Sonship and inheritance

To conclude, Paul applies the allegory to the Galatians' experience (4:28-30). The heavenly Jerusalem is free and is the mother of Christians who are identified with Isaac and born by promise. Just as the two sons were in conflict, with the ordinary son pursuing the promise or "spirit" son, so it continues. Abraham expelled the slave woman and her son so that neither she nor her son would share in the inheritance which was reserved only for the son of the free woman. This story of Abraham's treatment of Sarah and Hagar, and of Isaac and Ishmael, Paul uses to conclude that Judaism and its resultant "slavery" is no longer valid, but that Christians are called to liberty by the gospel of faith which is the ultimate fulfillment of the promise. To revert to a system which enslaved made no sense to Paul.

Applications

The church in every generation and every place seems to have its fair share of Pharisees or legalists. Why does this happen--because people want it to happen and allow it to happen! Some people are not comfortable in Christianity without artificial controls. Some people love the security of artificial walls and barriers. Some people do not know how to live in liberty without succumbing to the temptation of license. Legalism is attractive. A gospel that demands too much feels better. I am really paying a price, I must be really saved. I like to earn my way; I want to merit it because it feels like I am in control.

If only I could see that I can never be in control as long as it depends on undependable me. The only thing that can make our salvation sure is the gospel of grace, based on the promise founded in God's nature and inability to lie, and accepted by faith.

God seeks relationship with his people based only on the gift of his Son, and the reception of his Spirit (Gal. 4:6). The result is Christ being formed in us (Gal. 4:19).

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McAlester, OK 74501
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Demonstration of the Gospel

Paul wants the Galatians to find the power to live the gospel by properly defining the gospel and by avoiding artificial and inconsistent demands—whether too tight or too loose. The relationship of the Christian to the Father is no longer based on a master-slave relationship, but is a father-son relationship. False demands cause one to forget the real goal and present the problem of a new bondage which results in joyless living.

Outlining the Section

Now that we are a new creation, Christians have to ask: “Did Anything Change?” Mission work demands that the gospel be demonstrated by example. One way to outline the final section of Galatians is to focus on the life of liberty: (1) be free: allow others freedom, 5:1-15; (2) be spiritual: live life in the Spirit, 5:16-26; (3) be sharing: live life in the body, 6:1-10. Paul concludes the letter by affirming the centrality of the cross, so that what matters is not circumcision but a new creation.

Balancing Liberty and License

Christians are people who have been freed—get rid of the bars and chains; people who have faith; people who live life in the Spirit, in step with the Spirit; people who help one another, self-supporting, self-sustaining. When all is said and done, what counts is a new creation! Any approach other than God's is the destroyer of healthy, faithful life with God. The real goal is faithful life with God.

The book of Galatians provides one side of the most significant debate of the early church—how mission work should be conducted among non-law keeping Gentiles. It is a help to us as we ask how mission work should be conducted among non-Christian pagans. The gospel easily finds success among those from previously churched families, and even among God-fearing not-presently-churched. But what do you do when you get to the real pagans, the unaware? Paul's method was to preach that the gospel of grace was sufficient to save. Christ, formed within disciples is the foundation for ethical behavior.

Applications

The clash that missions must ever address is in the essence of the gospel. The conflict is not in the facts of the gospel, but in the implications of those facts. We must not fail to struggle with this challenge. The difference in Paul and his opponents was not that his opponents wanted the new Christians to keep the whole law (5:3), but just enough of the law that the new believers would have the same orientation as the old believers. Thus the older brothers had a checklist to decide if the new brothers were really orthodox in every aspect of their Christianity.

This kind of attitude (legalism) sets standards not revealed in the gospel, and sets those standards up as having some kind of inherent redemptive merit. This twists the gospel. Standards are good, but the standards that help us understand and live out the gospel must never be placed on a par with the gospel and understood as an effective substitute for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Ultimately, legalism is the foe to the sufficiency of the gospel of grace because it sets up a different understanding of God and thus a different approach to God. These different approaches, properly understood, proclaim the insufficiency and inefficiency of an infinite God to save without our help. Salvation by grace does not waive the life of dedicated response, but it does require that our response seek the tree of life, and not the knowledge of good and evil whereby we can become our own measure of success.

Legalism ultimately has the wrong focus. The goal is wrong. Since legalism sees changed or controlled behavior as the true evidence of Christianity, the quickest means of achieving behavioral changes becomes very important. The shortcut to these changes nearly always involves outer restraints rather than inner changes. The inner dynamic finds itself in our true identity rather than in how we appear to be or portray ourselves to be. This inner restraint, and the hope of reaching the right goal, comes through a relationship with the Creator.

Jones says it well,

Legalism considers Christian activities as premium payments on the purchase of salvation rather than thank you notes on the gift of salvation. Now, Christian activity from either of these viewpoints looks almost exactly the same, but the heart of the believer doing one and the heart of the believer doing the other are radically different."²

² Jerry Jones, *From Slavery to Sonship*.