

Galatians

Paul's letter to the

Leaders Guide



Living in line with the truth of the gospel

Galatians 2:14

HOW TO USE THIS MATERIAL

This study of Galatians is organized into 13 units. Each unit consists of two sections: 1) a Bible study and 2) a Reflection or Exercise section. The first section studies a portion of the Galatians text, while the second section takes some concept from the Scripture and helps you get a better understanding of it (“Reflection”) and/or to apply it practically to your life (“Exercise”).

There are three ways to use this material to grow in Christ. I will list the ways in ascending order of profitability and helpfulness.

An individual could use this workbook by first buying a popular commentary. I suggest John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, The Bible Speaks Today Series. (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968). Then, reading both the Galatians text and the commentary, go through the whole workbook yourself.

An informal mini-group of two or three people could also decide to do this together. In this case you should buy the Stott commentary and go through the workbook, meeting periodically simply to share the most important things you have been learning. This is much better than the first approach, because it injects a level of accountability and community into your study.

A home fellowship group with an equipped leader is by far the best context for the use of this workbook. A life changed by the Gospel happens best in a balanced community of worship and friendship as well as study. The concepts in this material are life-changing but take a great deal of reflection in order to grasp them. They will be grasped much better in a small group community that meets regularly. If you want to truly understand and grow through the material in this workbook — get thee into a home fellowship group!

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Galatians

The uniqueness of the Gospel

Study 1 | Galatians 1:1-9

In most of his letters to churches, Paul follows his salutation with a paragraph of thanksgiving and appreciation for the lives of the people. But news has reached him about the church in Galatia that has moved him deeply. His emotions almost immediately express themselves. He gets immediately into the substance of his argument.

Leader's background notes: The Outline of Galatians

The letter to the Galatians can be broken down into the following outline. (It is helpful to have this outline in your mind as you travel through the material.)

- 1:1-9 – Introduction to the Gospel and the occasion for the letter
- 1:10-2:21 – Paul's Personal Defense of his gospel ministry
- 3:1-4:3 – Paul's Theological Defense of the gospel message
- 5:1-6:18 – Paul's Practical Application of the gospel message to our lives

Read Galatians 1:1-9

1. Describe Paul's mood or frame of mind when he wrote this. What caused this attitude? Does it seem justified?

First, Paul is surprised — *astonished* (1:6a). Along with the shock comes anxiety and worry. They are taking hold of a gospel that isn't really a gospel (1:7), so they are in enormous danger. They are in *confusion* (1:7b).

Second, Paul also seems angry. His language is remarkably strong. He is directly angry at the ones who are misleading the converts of the church. He refers to them as *some people* who are *trying to pervert* the gospel (v.7b). He calls down a *condemnation* on them (v.9). More indirectly, he is also angry at the Galatians themselves, warning them that they are *quickly deserting* the God who called them (1:6b) — a serious charge! They are personally turning their backs on God.

We saw in the introduction that what caused this concerned, strong outburst was a group of teachers who were teaching Gentile Christian converts that they were obliged to keep the Jewish cultural customs of the Mosaic law — the dietary laws, circumcision and the rest of the ceremonial law. Then they would be truly pleasing to God. Probably, this did not appear to the Galatians to be such a radical departure from what they had been taught. Surely the whole point of the Christian life is to be pleasing to God! But Paul writes: "This is an absolute repudiation of all that I have been telling you!"

If we believe what Paul believed about the gospel, then we will find his attitude justifiable. If the Galatians are really turning their backs on God and taking hold of a gospel that isn't a gospel at all, then their condition is dangerous. The anxiety and anger that Paul expresses is the same that any loving parent or friend would experience if a child or companion was going seriously astray. Even his strong assertions of his authority are motivated by love, not arrogance.

2. Paul calls himself an apostle. What can you learn from vv.1-9 that an apostle is or does?

First, in vv.1-2, Paul says he has been *sent with immediate divine authority*. The Greek word *apostolos* means to be "sent." Paul's doubly strong phrase *not from men nor by man* drives home the uniqueness of the first apostles. Those today who are "called" to ministry by the Holy Spirit are not "from men" either — since the ultimate cause of their ministry is Jesus' call. But they *are* "by man." (The Greek word here — *dia* — means "by" or "through," as in our word *diameter*.) This means that though ministers ultimately receive their call from God, they are called through the intermediaries of other human ministers, through the election of a congregation, and so on. But Paul is claiming something more. He is saying that he did not receive his apostolic commission through anyone else at all. No other apostles commissioned him. He was commissioned and taught directly by the risen Jesus himself. (Possibly, this is why he mentions the resurrection in v.1 during his own introduction, and not down in vv.3-5 where he is summarizing the work of Christ.)

Second, in vv.8-9, Paul says he was *sent with a particular divine message* — the gospel. Paul thus can use *his* divine teaching as the standard for judging who is orthodox and who is heretical (Cf. 1:9 — *If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!*) We will look again below at what he says here, but it is clear that even an apostle cannot alter, revise or add to the message of Christ. His message is not the result of his study, research, reflection and wisdom. Even *he* cannot change the message.

Note: *Something that may come up:* Some people may ask if there are any more apostles today. The best answer is this: "Not in the full way of Paul and the Twelve." In the early church, we see that there were others besides Paul and the Twelve called "apostles of the churches" (see 2 Cor. 9:3, for example). Also, Barnabas was "sent" and thus an "apostle" to Antioch (Acts 11:22) and is later called an "apostle" (Acts 14:14). However, while they were sent out as missionaries, they were commissioned by the other, original apostles or by the churches. Barnabas never met the risen Christ and was never taught and tutored in the gospel directly by the bodily-present Christ as were Paul and the Twelve. Thus we can call people (then and now) with unusual leadership gifts, "small-a" apostles. But Paul is claiming to be a "capital-A" apostle. Because of their *immediate* commission by Christ, the "capital-A" apostles had absolute authority. (Thus their writings are Scripture.)

3. Paul offers an outline of the gospel in the early verses. No outline can be complete, but does this one seem complete to you?

First, we learn that we are helpless and lost; that is what the word “*rescue*” implies in v.4. Other founders of religions came primarily to teach, not to rescue. Jesus of course was a great teacher, but when Paul here gives us a nutshell version of Jesus’ ministry, he makes no mention of that at all. The average person on the street believes that a Christian is someone who follows Christ’s teaching and example. But Paul shows us here that this is impossible. You don’t rescue people unless they are in a lost/perishing condition and a helpless condition. They are perishing and unable to recover themselves. So this word *rescue* teaches what theologians call “spiritual inability.”

Second, we learn what was done to rescue us.

What Jesus did: Jesus made a sacrifice (*gave himself* – v.4a) which was substitutionary in nature. The word *for* means “on behalf of” or “in place of.” (The NIV translation gets this across with the word “himself” — *he gave himself for our sins* – v.4a). The principle of substitution will be brought out later, but it is the reason why the gospel is so revolutionary. Christ’s death was not just a general sacrifice, but a substitutionary one. This means that he did not merely “buy us a second chance,” but that *he* did all we needed to do. If Jesus’ death really paid for our sins on our behalf, then we can never fall back into condemnation. Why? Because God would then be getting two payments for the same sin, which is unjust! Jesus did all we should have done, in our place, so when he becomes our Savior, we are absolutely free from penalty or condemnation.

What the Father did: God accepted the work of Christ on our behalf by raising him “from the dead” (v.1) and by giving the “*grace and peace*” (v.3) that Christ won and achieved for us.

Third, we learn *why God did it*. It was all done out of grace — not because of anything we have done, but *according to the will of our God and Father* – v.4d. (We are also *called by the grace of Christ*. v.6) We did not even deserve or ask for rescue but Jesus came *according to the will of the Father*. There is no indication of any other motivation or cause for Christ’s mission except the will of God. Therefore salvation is sheer unmerited grace. That is why the only one who gets “*glory forever*” for our salvation is God alone (v.5).

4. According to vv.6-7, any change to the gospel makes it null and void. Why?

In v.6 we are told that they were “*called by the grace of Christ*.” This means that God called us, we didn’t call him. And God accepted us right away despite our lack of merit. That is the order of the gospel. God accepts us and then we follow (not *desert*) him. But other religious systems have it the other way around. We must give God something and then he accepts us.

The people who suggested that the Galatians simply add the Mosaic ceremonial law to Christ were not simply suggesting a revision of the gospel but a complete reversal. In

v.7, we are told that this teaching “perverts” or literally “reverses” the gospel. This is illuminating. If you add *anything* to Christ (the grace of Christ *plus* something else) as a requirement for acceptance with God, you completely *reverse* the “order” of the gospel and make it null and void. That is why in verse 6 Paul says that the false teachers are producing “a different gospel,” which he quickly qualifies in v.7 as “really no gospel at all.” Literally, Paul says “another gospel, which is not another.” This is strikingly crystal clear. Another gospel is not another gospel. To change the gospel the tiniest bit is to lose it so completely that the new teaching has no right to be called a “gospel.” Later you will find this passage in Luther’s Preface to the Galatians:

“For there is no middle ground between Christian righteousness and works-righteousness. There is no other alternative to Christian righteousness but works-righteousness; if you do not build your confidence on the work of Christ you must build your confidence on your own work. (Martin Luther, *Preface*)

5. How do people “add to the gospel” today in ways that diminish its power?

There are many examples of this. Spend time as a group thinking about and discussing this. Overall, Paul condemns any teaching that is not based on the fact that:

- We are too sinful to contribute to our salvation (we need a complete *rescue*),
- therefore, we are saved by belief in Jesus work, (the *grace of Christ*) plus nothing else.

Here are three examples of current views that deny one or both of these two truths:

(1) In some churches, it is implicitly or explicitly taught that you are saved through your “surrender” to Christ plus right beliefs and behavior. This is a fairly typical mistake in evangelical churches. People are challenged to “give your life to Jesus” and/or to “ask him into your life.” This sounds very biblical, but it still can reject the grace-first principle fairly easily. Most people think that it means that we are saved by a strong belief and trust in and love for God, along with a life committed to him. Therefore, they feel they must begin by generating a high degree of spiritual sorrow, hunger, and love in order to get Christ’s presence. Then they must somehow maintain this if they are going to “stay saved.” In other words, many conservative churches functionally teach the idea that we are saved *because of* (the level of) our faith. But the gospel says that we are saved *through* our faith. The first approach really makes our performance the savior, and the second makes Christ’s performance the Savior. It is not the *level* but the *object* of our faith that saves us.

(2) In other churches, it is taught that it doesn’t really matter what you believe as long as you are a loving and good person. This is a typical mistake in “liberal” churches. This view teaches that all good persons, regardless of their religion (or lack of one), will find God. This sounds extremely open-minded on the surface, but it rejects the grace-first principle in two ways.

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Read Galatians 1:1-9

- 1. Describe Paul's mood or frame of mind when he wrote this. What caused this attitude? Does it seem justified?**
- 2. Paul calls himself an apostle. What can you learn from vv.1-9 about what an apostle is or does?**
- 3. Paul offers an outline of the gospel in the early verses. No outline can be complete, but does this one seem complete to you?**

READING AND REFLECTION

Read and mark “!” for something that helped you, and “?” for something that raised a question

Martin Luther’s preface to Galatians

(Abridgement and paraphrase by Tim Keller)

1. The most important thing in the world

The one doctrine which I have supremely in my heart is that of faith in Christ, from whom, through whom and unto whom all my theological thinking flows back and forth, day and night. This rock, which we call the doctrine of justification through faith, was shaken by Satan in paradise when he persuaded our first parents that they might by their own wisdom and power become like God. Every since then the whole world has invented innumerable religions and ways through which, without the aid of Christ, use their works to redeem themselves from evil and sins.

When Paul discusses the biblical doctrine of justification by faith he explains that there are several kinds of “righteousness.” First, there is political or *civil righteousness* — the nation’s public laws — which magistrates and lawyers may defend and teach. Second, there is *cultural righteousness* — the standards of our family and social grouping or class — which parents and schools may teach. Third, there is *ethical righteousness* — the Ten Commandments and law of God — which the church may teach but only in light of Christian righteousness. So all these may be received without danger, as long as we attribute to them no power to satisfy for sin, to please God, or to deserve grace... These kinds of righteousness are gifts of God, like all good things we enjoy...

Yet there is another righteousness, far above the others, which Paul calls “the righteousness of faith” — Christian righteousness. God imputes it to us apart from our works — in other words, it is *passive* righteousness, as the others are *active*. For we *do* nothing for it, and we *give* nothing for it. We only receive it.

2. The need for Christian righteousness

This “passive” righteousness is a mystery that the world cannot understand. Indeed, Christians never completely understand it themselves, and thus do not take advantage of it when they are troubled and tempted. So we have to constantly teach it, repeat it, and work it out in practice. Anyone who does not understand this righteousness or cherish it in the heart and conscience will continually be buffeted by fears and depression. *Nothing gives peace like this passive righteousness.*

For human beings by nature, when they get near either danger or death itself, will of necessity examine their own worthiness. We defend ourselves before all threats by recounting our good deeds and moral efforts. But then the remembrance of sins and

flaws inevitably comes to mind, and this tears us apart, and we think, “How many errors and sins and wrongs I have done! Please God, let me live so I can fix and amend them.” We become obsessed with our *active* righteousness and are terrified by its imperfections. But the real evil is that we trust our own power to be righteous and will not lift up our eyes to see what Christ has done *for* us... So the troubled conscience has no cure for its desperation and feeling of unworthiness unless it takes hold of the forgiveness of sins by *grace*, offered free of charge in Jesus Christ, which is this passive or Christian righteousness... If I tried to fulfill the law myself, I could not trust in what I had accomplished, neither could it stand up to the judgment of God. So...*I rest only upon the righteousness of Christ... which I do not produce but receive, God the Father freely giving it to us through Jesus Christ.*

3. Law and grace

It is an absolute and unique teaching in all the world, to teach people, through Christ, to live as if there were no law or wrath or punishment. In a sense, they do not exist any longer for the Christian, but only total grace and mercy for Christ’s sake. Once you are in Christ, the law is the greatest guide for your life, but until you have Christian righteousness, all the law can do is to show you how sinful and condemned you are. In fact, to those outside of Christian righteousness, the law needs to be expounded in all its force. Why? So that people who think they have power to be righteous before God will be humbled by the law and understand they are sinners.

Therefore we must be careful to use the law appropriately. If we used the law in order to be accepted by God through obedience, then Christian righteousness becomes mixed up with earned/moral righteousness in our minds. If we try to earn our righteousness by *doing* many good deeds, we actually do nothing. We neither please God through our works-righteousness *nor* do we honor the purpose for which the law was given. But if we first receive Christian righteousness, then we can use the law, not for our salvation, but for his honor and glory, and to lovingly show our gratitude.

So then, have we nothing to do to obtain this righteousness? No, *nothing at all!* For this righteousness comes by doing nothing, hearing nothing, knowing nothing, but rather in knowing and believing this only — that Christ has gone to the right hand of the Father, not to become our judge, but to become *for* us our wisdom, our righteousness, our holiness, our salvation! Now God sees no sin in us, for in this heavenly righteousness sin has no place. So now we may certainly think, “Although I still sin, I don’t despair, because Christ lives, who is both my righteousness and my eternal life.” In that righteousness I have no sin, no fear, no guilty conscience, no fear of death. I am indeed a sinner in this life of mine and in my own righteousness, but I have another life, another righteousness above this life, which is in Christ, the Son of God, who knows no sin or death, but is eternal righteousness and eternal life.

4. Living the gospel

While we live here on earth, we will be accused, exercised with temptations, oppressed with heaviness and sorrow, and bruised by the law with its demands of active righteousness. Because of this, Paul sets out in this letter of Galatians to teach us, to comfort us, and to keep us constantly aware of this Christian righteousness. For if the truth of being *justified by Christ alone* (not by our works) is lost, then all Christian truths are lost. For there is no middle ground between Christian righteousness and works-righteousness. There is no other alternative to Christian righteousness *but* works-righteousness; if you do not build your confidence on the work of Christ, you must build your confidence on your own work. On this truth and *only* on this truth the church is built and has its being.

This distinction is easy to utter in words, but in use and experience it is very hard. So I challenge you to exercise yourselves continually in these matters through study, reading, meditation on the Word and prayer, so that in the time of trial you will be able to both *inform* and *comfort* both your consciences and others, to bring them from law to grace, from active/works-righteousness to passive/Christ's righteousness. In times of struggle, the devil will seek to terrify us by using against us our past record and the wrath and law of God. So if we cannot see the differences between the two kinds of righteousness, and if we do not take hold of Christ by faith, sitting at the right hand of God (Heb.7:25) and pleading our case as sinners to the Father, then we are under the law, not under grace. Christ is no savior, but a lawgiver, and no longer our salvation, but an eternal despair.

So learn to "speak the gospel" to one's heart. For example, when the law creeps into your conscience, learn to be a cunning logician — learn to use arguments of the gospel against it. Say:

O law! You would climb up into the kingdom of my conscience, and there reign and condemn me for sin, and would take from me the joy of my heart which I have by faith in Christ, and drive me to desperation, that I might be without hope. You have overstepped your bounds. Know your place! You are a guide for my behavior, but you are not Savior and Lord of my heart. For I am baptized, and through the gospel am called to receive righteousness and eternal life... So *trouble me not!* For I will not allow you, so intolerable a tyrant and tormentor, to reign in my heart and conscience — for they are the seat and temple of Christ the Son of God, who is the king of righteousness and peace, and my most sweet savior and mediator. He shall keep my conscience joyful and quiet in the sound and pure doctrine of the gospel, through the knowledge of this passive and heavenly righteousness.

When we are assured of this righteousness, we not only cheerfully work well in our vocations, but we submit to all manner of burdens and dangers in this present life, because we know that this is the will of God, and that this obedience pleases him. This then is the argument of this Epistle, which Paul expounds against the false teachers who had darkened the Galatians' understanding of this righteousness by faith.

Discussion questions

- 1. What is the key difference between Christian righteousness and all other kinds?**
- 2. What do we mean by passive righteousness?**
- 3. Why is the difference between passive righteousness and active righteousness so important?**
- 4. What is the single best thing you learned from Luther? How would it make you different if you really understood and applied it?**