

When Good Becomes Bad

Galatians 1:13-24

With Study Questions

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Let us remember how the Apostle Paul is laboring to defend his apostolic office and message which is **“not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead” (1:1)**. The resurrection of Christ is mentioned realizing that the message of the power of God to regenerate – to make spiritually alive – by God-given faith alone is under attack. It was under attack then and still is to this day – in the church.

Paul, over and above trying to simply win an argument desires the recipients of his letter also be the recipients of **“Grace...and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3)**. This grace and peace is ours when we come to realize and embrace the fact that He **“gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age” (1:4)**. This deliverance we have is not according to the will or power of man but **“according to the will of our God and Father” (1:4)**. This must be emphasized in order for us to keep our own pride and instinctive desires to be self-congratulatory in check. It is not the power or will of self, or man, who receives the glory but it is God **“to whom be glory forever and ever” (1:5)**.

It was a source of astonishment to Paul that these churches were **“turning away so soon from Him who called you [them] in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel (1:6)**. This is not so much addressing the perseverance of the saints at an individual level (that is, people losing their salvation) as much as the tendency for churches to be swayed from their appointed task (preaching a true biblical gospel) by powerful, charismatic personalities.

As much as these other messages might have had a Christian flavor to them, these messages were **“not another” (1:7)** gospel at all but were a perversion of **“the gospel of Christ” (1:7)**. Those who pervert the message of the gospel are not to be taken lightly but are to be **“accursed” (1:8, 9)**.

The message Paul brings is not designed to please men or redefine God. Paul is not an inventor of Christ but rather **“a bondservant of Christ” (1:10)**. What Paul gives us is a message straight from heaven. It is the means by which we are rescued from slavery to the world, Satan and our own natures. It is also the means by which we are brought into slavery to abundance, life, and righteousness. This kind of deliverance requires a message that is **“not according to man” (1:11)**. It requires a message that comes **“through the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:12)**. It is this message that lies on the pages before us.

Paul now continues arguing his position.

When Good is Bad

Is it good to be good? Can you think of a time when goodness can actually be a bad thing? The apostle Paul is going to write about what a good Jew he was.

For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and *tried to destroy it*.¹⁴ And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers (Galatians 1:13, 14).

In order to appreciate the full impact of these verses let us recognize that Paul's detractors were people from his similar background. The problem wasn't the converted Greeks or pagans – the problem in these churches weren't people we would look at and say, "Look how bad that guy is!" The problem came from the so-called converted Jews. These were people who were so steeped in a works righteousness (God saves people who live up to a certain standard) that they simply couldn't let it go.

They were probably people who had obtained a level of outward goodness. And their own goodness became their worst enemy. Goodness becomes a bad thing when we think that it is by being good that God saves us. Jesus tells a parable to and about such people.

Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector."¹¹ The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'¹³ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise *his* eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified *rather* than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:9-15).

Justification by faith is the theme of this epistle (if not all epistles). Observe how Jesus teaches justification. It was not the "righteous" man who was justified before God but the man who cried out for mercy. Not a week ago I was speaking with a man who was confident that when God judges that world, he would be saved by virtue of his own goodness. It's good to be good. But when we think we're good enough to stand justified before God our own goodness becomes a death sentence.

Piety or Mercy

When churches become bastions of piety rather than temples of mercy – when the emphasis is on quiet times, personal victorious living, fasting and somehow obtaining the experiential power of God rather than the loaf and the cup – they are easily drawn into this same grievous error. There were few people more pious and

righteous than the monk, Martin Luther. Refuting the works righteousness found in Roman Catholicism, Luther wrote of his monastic life.

I crucified Christ daily in my monkish life, and blasphemed God through my false faith, wherein I then lived continually. Outwardly, I was not as other men, extortioners, unjust, whoremongers; but I kept chastity, poverty, and obedience. Moreover, I was free from the cares of this present life. Notwithstanding, I fostered under this cloaked holiness, and trust in mine own righteousness, continual mistrust, doubtfulness, fear, hatred, and blasphemy against God. And this my righteousness was nothing but a filthy puddle, and the very kingdom of the devil. For Satan loves such saints, and accounts them for his dear darlings, who destroy their own bodies and souls, and deprive themselves of all the blessings of God's gifts. Such saints are the bondslaves of Satan, and therefore are driven to speak, think, and do whatever he will, although outwardly they seem to excel all others in good works, in holiness and strictness of life.¹

The Ultimate Jew

One good reason for being good is to let others know that we don't trust in our goodness. When Paul points out that he had **advanced in Judaism beyond many of his contemporaries in his own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of his fathers**, he was basically saying that he was better at practicing this Jewish piety than all the false teachers in Galatia. Paul drives this point home in Philippians where he writes,

Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation!
³ For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh, ⁴ though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: ⁵ circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. ⁷ But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. ⁸ Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which *is* from the law, but that which *is* through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; ¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His

¹Luther, M. 1996. *Commentary on Galatians*. Index created by Christian Classics Foundation. (electronic ed.) (Ga 1:18). Christian Classics Foundation: Simpsonville SC

resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death,¹¹ if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead (Philippians 3:2-12).

Nobody had their act together before God any better than Paul. But when it comes to standing justified before God, Paul considered his most holy, God-given attributes as rubbish. Paul would take no comfort in his own righteousness, which is from the law, but rather from that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that is from God by faith.

Paul realized that the best – most moral, righteous and wise – that walk in error are more feeble than the weakest who walk by faith.

Set Apart from the Womb

But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called *me* through His grace,¹⁶ to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood,¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those *who were* apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus (Galatians 1:15-17).

Why did God wait so long to convert Paul? Paul, who plotted against, persecuted and consented unto the death of the church and its members, was separated to do God's work from his mother's womb – to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. At Paul's birth he was already an apostle in the eyes of God. There was no chance that he would not be met and converted by Christ on the road to Damascus. And in due time his apostolic office would be known by the entire world.

One might wonder why God allowed Paul to wreak such havoc since he was separated from his mother's womb. There are all sorts of possible answers as to why Jesus didn't call Paul prior to his earthly ministry. There are all sorts of possible answers as to why God allowed, and even ordains, the messes we have made for ourselves prior to (and even after) our conversions. I won't offer specific guesses but will offer what I believe to be a biblical fact – God had good and sufficient reason for having ordained that Paul would be a persecutor of the church prior to being a member of the church.

Paul--Not a Student of the Apostles

So how did Paul know all the things he knew? Paul's point in verses sixteen and seventeen is that his message wasn't one he received from men. Paul didn't sit under the other apostle's teaching and misunderstand their instruction. Certainly Paul's teaching was in perfect accord with the other apostles, but not because they taught him.

It was due to their all having the same teacher – the Holy Spirit – who granted them prophetic insight.

Ponder this when so-called modern apostles hit the scene. They might seem sincere when they ask us to check what they say against the Scriptures. But one doesn't check Isaiah to see if Ezekiel is correct; nor does one check Romans to see if the gospel of Matthew is accurate. The words of an apostle, which are the words of Scripture, are self-evident and need no validation. Paul will now write of his interaction with the other apostles.

Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. ²⁰ (Now concerning the things which I write to you, indeed, before God, I do not lie.) ²¹Afterward I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia (Galatians 1:18-21).

It appears to be Paul's point that he spent a mere fifteen days with Peter, which is hardly enough time for Peter to fully catechize him. And he didn't see any of the other apostles at all except James. Paul then speaks by way of lawful oath before God heightening not only his own veracity but also the judgment upon the false teachers. He then writes briefly of his missionary journeys.

Message over Personality

And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which *were* in Christ. ²³ But they were hearing only, "He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once *tried to destroy*." ²⁴ And they glorified God in me (Galatians 1:22-24).

Finally we recognize that the presence of Paul was not a necessity. God was glorified through Paul by virtue of faith that he preached. It wasn't his dynamic personality nor was it his ability to perform signs and wonders nor was it the warmth of his loving touch. Beware of churches that are built upon the personality of an individual versus churches built upon the message of justification by faith in Christ. I would consider myself a dismal failure as a pastor if my own absence meant the decimation of our local church. It is the message that is glorious – it is through the message that God redeems. The church that respects, carries and emphasizes the message brought by Paul – justification by faith – is a church that will bring glory to God and blessings to its people.

Questions for Study

1. When does good become bad (pages 2, 3)?
2. According to Jesus, how is a man justified before God (page 3)?
3. What should be the emphasis of the church (pages 3, 4)?
4. Discuss the comments made by Martin Luther (page 4).
5. Discuss Paul's comments regarding his own excellence as a Jew (pages 4, 5).
6. When was Paul set apart to be an apostle (page 5)?
7. Why do you suppose God didn't ordain Paul's conversion until after he had done so much damage (page 5)?
8. How did Paul come to learn all the things he knew about God (pages 5, 6)?
9. When evaluating a modern day "apostle" what is wrong with checking him against the Scriptures (page 6)?
10. How important was Paul's personal presence when it came to the preaching of the gospel (page 6)?