

**GALATIANS
FOR YOU**

TIMOTHY KELLER
GALATIANS
FOR YOU



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Galatians For You

© Timothy Keller, 2013

Published by:

The Good Book Company

Tel (US): 866 244 2165

Tel (UK): 0333 123 0880

International: +44 (0) 208 942 0880

Email: admin@thegoodbook.co.uk

Websites:

North America: www.thegoodbook.com

UK: www.thegoodbook.co.uk

Australia: www.thegoodbook.com.au

New Zealand: www.thegoodbook.co.nz



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ISBN:9781908762573

Design by André Parker

Printed in the USA

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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centered
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Galatians For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **gray** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary toward the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

INTRODUCTION TO GALATIANS

The book of Galatians is dynamite. It is an explosion of joy and freedom which leaves us enjoying a deep significance, security and satisfaction—the life of blessing God calls His people into.

Why? Because it brings us face to face with the gospel. It's very common in Christian circles to assume that “the gospel” is something mainly for non-Christians. We see it as a set of basic “ABC” doctrines that are the way in which someone enters the kingdom of God. We often assume that once we're converted, we don't need to hear or study or understand the gospel—we need more “advanced” material.

But in this short letter, Paul outlines the bombshell truth that *the gospel is the A to Z of the Christian life*. It is not only the way to enter the kingdom; it is the way to live as part of the kingdom. It is the way Christ transforms people, churches and communities.

We're going to see Paul showing the young Christians in Galatia that their spiritual problem is not only caused by *failing to live* in obedience to God, but also by *relying on* obedience to Him. We're going to see him telling them that all they need—all they could ever need—is the gospel of God's unmerited favor to them through Christ's life, death and resurrection. We're going to hear him solving their issues not through telling them to “be better Christians”, but by calling them to live out the implications of the gospel.

We're going to watch Paul challenge them, and us, with the simple truth that the gospel is not just the ABC of Christianity, but the A to Z—that Christians need the gospel just as much as non-Christians.

The gospel is not only the way to enter the kingdom; it is the way to live in the kingdom.

Paul will explain to us that the truths of the gospel change life from top to bottom; that they transform our hearts, our thinking and our approach to absolutely everything. The gospel—the message that we are more wicked than we ever dared believe, but more loved and accepted in Christ than we ever dared hope—creates a radical new dynamic for personal growth, for obedience, for love.

Galatians is all about the gospel, which all of us need throughout all of our lives. It's dynamite, and I pray that it explodes in your heart, and makes you passionate to see it do the same work in others' hearts, as you read this book.

Below, I've briefly summarized the historical setting of the letter; and in an appendix, I've touched on some modern debates over its message. But if at this point you want to get into Galatians itself, turn to page 13.

Timothy Keller

The historical context

The apostle Paul was a church-planting missionary. After he planted a church and left a region, he continued to supervise new congregations through his letters. One of these letters is this epistle to the Christian churches in the area of Galatia in Asia Minor. Most scholars agree that this letter was written by Paul around AD50 (only 15-20 years after the death of Christ). It is helpful to recognize the following three things from the historical setting, which will help us understand this epistle:

- This letter addresses a social and racial division in the churches of Galatia. The first Christians in Jerusalem were Jewish, but as the gospel spread out from that center, increasing numbers of Gentiles began to receive Christ. However, a group of teachers in Galatia were now insisting that the Gentile Christians practice all the traditional ceremonial customs of the law of Moses, as the Jewish Christians did. They taught that the Gentiles had to

observe all the dietary laws and be circumcised for full acceptance and to be completely pleasing to God.

- Although this specific controversy may seem remote to us today, Paul addressed it with an abiding, all-important truth. He taught that the cultural divisions and disunity in the Galatian churches were due to a confusion about the nature of the gospel. By insisting on Christ-plus-anything-else as a requirement for full acceptance by God, these teachers were presenting a whole different way of relating to God (a “different gospel”, 1:6) from the one Paul had given them (“the one we preached”, 1:8). It is this different gospel that was creating the cultural division and strife. Paul forcefully and unapologetically fought the “different gospel” because to lose one’s grip of the true gospel is to desert and lose Christ Himself (1:6). Therefore, everything was at stake in this debate.
- The most obvious fact about the historical setting is often the most overlooked. In the letter to the Galatians, Paul expounds in detail what the gospel is and how it works. But the intended audience of this exposition of the gospel are all professing Christians. It is not simply non-Christians but also believers who need continually to learn the gospel and apply it to their lives.

1. THE UNIQUENESS OF THE GOSPEL

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the opening of Galatians is Paul's tone, and the frame of mind that lies behind it. He is surprised. And he also seems angry. His language, almost from the outset, is remarkably strong. Where normally Paul's letters move on, after his greeting, to a thanksgiving for those he's writing to (see, for example, Philippians 1:3-8; Colossians 1:3-8; 1 Corinthians 1:4-9), here he simply says: "I am astonished..." (**verse 6a***). What has made Paul so emotional?

Desertion

First, Paul is astonished because these young Christians are taking hold of a **gospel**[†] that isn't really a gospel (**v 7**), so they are in enormous danger. They are in "confusion" (**v 7b**).

Second, he is directly angry at the ones who are misleading the converts of the church—those who are "trying to pervert the gospel" (**v 7b**). He calls down condemnation on them (**v 9**). More indirectly, he is also angry at the Galatian Christians themselves, warning them that they are deserting the God who called them (**v 6b**)—a serious charge!

We'll see as we walk through Paul's letter that what caused his opening 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

* All Galatians verse references being looked at in each chapter are in **bold**.

† Words in **gray** are defined in the Glossary (page 187).

ceremonial law in order to be truly pleasing to God. To the Galatians, this probably didn't appear to be a radical difference from what they'd been taught. Surely the whole point of the Christian life is to be pleasing to God! But Paul says: *This is an absolute repudiation of all that I have been telling you.*

He is not pulling his punches! But 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.

Paul's Right to Speak

But *who* is Paul to write to these Christians in this way?

An "apostle" (**v 1**)—a man who has been sent with *immediate divine authority*. The Greek word *apostolos* means to be "sent". Paul's phrase "not from men nor by man" drives home the uniqueness of the first apostles. Those who are called to ministry by the Holy Spirit today are not "from men" either—the ultimate cause of their ministry is Jesus' call, and the ultimate authority for their ministry is Jesus' word in the Bible. But they are appointed "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, or *through* the election of a congregation, and so on.

Paul is claiming something more than this for himself. 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* (see Acts 9:1-19).

Second, in **verses 8-9**, Paul says he was sent with a *particular divine message*—the gospel. This means his divine teaching is the standard

for judging who is **orthodox** and who is **heretical**, as he says in **verse 9**: “If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!” Even an apostle cannot alter, revise or add to the message of Christ. What he says is not the result of his study, research, reflection and wisdom. It is God-given, and both unchanging and unchangeable.

We might wonder: are there any more apostles today? Not in the full way of Paul and **the Twelve**. In the early church, others were called “apostles of the churches” (for example, 2 Corinthians 9:3). Barnabas was “sent” to Antioch, and in that sense was an “apostle” (Acts 11:22, and see also Acts 14:14). However, while they were sent out as missionaries, they were commissioned by the other, original apostles or by the churches—“by man”. Barnabas never met the risen Christ; he was never taught and tutored in the gospel by the bodily-present Christ, as Paul and the Twelve were. So we can call people who have unusual leadership gifts, then and now, “small-a” apostles. But Paul is a “capital-A” Apostle, commissioned directly by Jesus. The “capital-A” Apostles had, and have, absolute authority. What *they* write is Scripture.

What is the Gospel?

And so this divinely appointed Apostle reminds the Galatian Christians of his particular divine message—the gospel. In his opening, he gives them a quick, yet pretty comprehensive, outline of the gospel message:

Who we are: Helpless and lost. That is what the word “rescue” implies in **verse 4**. Other founders of religions came to teach, not to rescue. Jesus was a great teacher, but when Paul gives us this 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 implies that’s impossible. After all, you don’t rescue people unless they are in a lost state and a helpless condition! Imagine you see a drowning woman. It doesn’t

help her at all if you throw her a manual on how to swim. You don't throw her some teaching—you throw her a rope. And Jesus is not so much a teacher as He is a rescuer. Because that's what we most need. Nothing in who we are or what we do saves us. This is what theologians call "spiritual inability".

What Jesus did: How did Jesus rescue us? He "gave himself for our **sins**" (v 4a). He made a sacrifice which was **substitutionary** in nature. The word "for" means "on behalf of" or "in place of". Substitution is why the gospel is so revolutionary. Christ's death was not just a general sacrifice, but a substitutionary one. He did not merely

Substitution is why the gospel is so revolutionary.

buy us a "second chance", giving us another opportunity to get life right and stay right with God. He did *all* we needed to do, but cannot do. If Jesus' death really paid for our sins on our behalf, 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 us the "**grace and peace**" (v 3) that Christ won and achieved for us.

Why God did it: This 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 did not ask for rescue, but God in His grace planned what we didn't realize we needed, and Christ by His grace (v 6) came to achieve the rescue we could never have achieved ourselves.

There is no indication of any other motivation or cause for Christ's mission except the will of God. There is nothing in us which merits it. Salvation is sheer *grace*.

That is why the only one who gets "glory for ever" is God alone (v 5). If we contributed to our rescue... if we had rescued ourselves...

or if God had seen something deserving of rescue, or useful for His plan, in us... or even if we had simply called out for rescue based on our own reasoning and understanding... then we could pat ourselves on the back for the part we played in saving ourselves.

But the biblical gospel—Paul’s gospel—is clear that salvation, from first to last, is God’s doing. It is His calling; His plan; His action; His work. And so it is He who deserves all the glory, for all time.

This is the humbling truth that lies at the heart of Christianity. We love to be our own saviors. Our hearts love to manufacture glory for themselves. So we find messages of self-salvation extremely attractive, whether they are religious (*Keep these rules and you earn eternal blessing*) or secular (*Grab hold of these things and you’ll experience blessing now*). The gospel comes and turns them all upside down. It says: *You are in such a hopeless position that you need a rescue that has nothing to do with you at all.* And then it says: *God in Jesus provides a rescue which gives you far more than any false salvation your heart may love to chase.*

Paul reminds us that in the gospel we are both brought lower and raised higher than we can imagine. And the glory for that, rightly, all goes to “our God and Father ... for ever and ever. **Amen**” (v 5).

Questions for reflection

1. Paul’s tone reminds us that Christian faith is a matter of heart, as well as head—feelings, as well as intellect. How does this encourage you? How does it challenge you?
2. When do you find it hardest to accept the authority of apostolic New Testament teaching? Why?
3. How would you explain the gospel to someone who asked you today what you believe?

PART TWO

Gospel Revision = Gospel Reversal

The biblical gospel of grace is a precious thing. And it's this glorious gospel that the Galatian churches' leaders have been perverting, and that the Galatian church members have been deserting.

This matters because Paul says that any such change to *the* gospel means it becomes "no gospel at all" (**verse 7**). Why is this? Why is it that any change to the gospel, however small, makes it null and void?

Because, Paul says, Christians were "called ... by the grace of Christ" (**v 6**). 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 Him. But other religious systems have it the other way around. We must give God something, and *then* He accepts us. So in **verse 7**, Paul says that any teaching which adds keeping Mosaic ceremonial law to faith in Christ "perverts" the gospel. Literally, the word he chooses to use means "reverses".

This is illuminating. If you add *anything* to Christ as a requirement for acceptance with God—if you start to say: *To be saved I need the grace of Christ plus something else*—you completely reverse the "order" of the gospel and make it null and void. Any revision of the gospel reverses it. That is why in **verse 6** Paul says that the false teachers are producing "a different gospel", which he quickly qualifies in **verse 7** as "really no gospel at all". Literally, Paul says: "*another gospel, which is not another*".

This is crystal clear. Another gospel is not another gospel. It is *no* 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". The sixteenth-century Reformer Martin Luther summed it up well:

"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.”

(Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians, Preface)

Losing the Gospel Today

What Paul battled in his day, and Luther fought against in his, we witness in ours, too. Remember, 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*).
- 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. People think 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”. So functionally—that is, in actual reality—a church is teaching 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

people, regardless of their religion (or lack of one), will find God. This sounds extremely open-minded on the surface, but it is actually intolerant of grace, in two ways.

First, it teaches that good works are enough to get to God. If all good people can know God, then Jesus' death was not necessary; all it takes is virtue. The trouble is, this means bad people have no hope, contradicting the gospel, which invites "both good and bad" to God's feast (Matthew 22:10). If you say people are saved by

If good people
can know God,
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being good, then only "the good" can come in to God's feast. The gospel offer becomes exclusive, not inclusive.

Second, it encourages people to think that if they are tolerant and open, they are pleasing to God.

They don't *need* grace—they get eternal life for themselves. And so "glory for ever" (v 5) goes to them, for being good enough for heaven. The gospel, however, challenges people to see their radical sin. Without that sense of one's own evil, the knowledge of God's grace will not be transforming, and we will not understand how much God is glorified by the presence of *anyone at all* in heaven.

3. A third example is found in churches that are *extremely intolerant of small differences of dress or custom*. The false teachers of Galatia wanted (as we will see) to impose many old rules and regulations having to do with dress, diet and ritual observances. It is natural for us to associate them with highly regulated churches and religious communities which control their members very tightly and direct them into the "right" way to eat, dress, date, schedule their time, and so on. Or they may insist on a detailed observance of many complicated rituals. Modern-day examples of the Galatian church would be highly authoritarian churches or highly ritualized churches, highly legalistic churches. To my mind, these churches are the most obvious of the three examples we've

looked at, and therefore less dangerous. The first and second are much more prevalent, and perilous.

Is our Gospel the True Gospel?

Since the one true gospel is so crucial, and so often and easily reversed, this awakens in us a troubling question: how can we ensure the gospel we believe is actually true? How do we know it is not merely a gospel that we *feel* is true, or are *told* is true, or *think* is true, or *sounds* to us as true—but a gospel that *is* true, objectively, and therefore *can* save, really and eternally?

Paul lays down, in the strongest possible language, a plumb line for judging all truth claims, whether external (from teachers, writers, thinkers, preachers) or internal (feelings, sensations, experience). That standard is the gospel that he (and all the other capital-A Apostles) received from Christ and taught, and which is found in this letter and throughout the rest of the Bible.

“If we ... should preach a gospel other than the one ... let him be eternally condemned” (v 8). Here is how to judge external authorities such as human teachers, or human institutional leaders, or even ordained officers in a church hierarchy.

It is remarkable that by saying “we”, Paul includes himself as a human authority. He is saying that *he* must be rejected if he ever says: *I’ve changed my mind about what the gospel is*. As he’ll tell us, the gospel did not come to him through a process of reasoning and reflection; it was received, not arrived at. So he is not free to alter it through reasoning and reflecting. In Galatians 2, Paul will tell us that his gospel was confirmed by others who had also gotten the message by revelation from the risen Christ. This apostolic consensus—this original Christ-given “gospel deposit”—is therefore the touchstone for judging all truth claims, from the outside and the inside.

This is very important. Paul is saying in **verse 8** that even his apostolic authority derives from the gospel’s authority, not the other way

around. Paul is telling the Galatians to evaluate and judge both him as an apostle and his teaching with the biblical gospel. The Bible judges the church; the church does not judge the Bible. The Bible is the foundation for and the creator of the church; the church is not the foundation for or creator of the Bible. The church and its hierarchy must be evaluated by the believer with the biblical gospel as the touchstone or plumb line for judging all truth claims.

Nor is the final plumb line for truth our personal experience. We do not judge the Bible by our feelings or convictions; we judge our experiences by the Bible. That means that if an angel literally showed up before a crowd of people and taught that salvation was by good works (or anything except faith alone in Christ alone), you should literally kick the angel out (**v 8**)! When Paul says: “If we or an angel...,” he gives a sweeping summary of proper Christian “epistemology”—how we know what is true.

Why it Matters

We noticed at the start of this chapter that Paul’s tone is uncompromising, to say the least! But that’s because the gospel is something we need to be uncompromising about. That’s because, first, a different gospel means *you are deserting the one who called you* (**v 6**). To abandon gospel **theology** is to abandon Christ personally. What you do in theology eventually affects your experience. In other words, a difference in your understanding of **doctrine** leads to a difference in your understanding of who Jesus is—and means it’s questionable whether you really know Him at all.

Second, *a different gospel is no gospel at all* (**v 6b-7**). This means that the gospel message, by its very nature, cannot be changed even slightly without being lost. It’s like a vacuum. You can’t allow in some air and say that it is now a “90 per cent vacuum” or an “air-enriched vacuum”. It is either a complete vacuum or no vacuum at all! Equally, the message of the gospel is that you are saved by grace through Christ’s work and nothing else at all. As soon as you add anything to

it, you have lost it entirely. The moment you revise it, you reverse it.

Third, *a different gospel brings condemnation (v 8-9)*. Later in the book Paul says that different “gospels” bring a curse with them. This means, ultimately, that to alter the gospel is to play with eternal life and death. But it also means very practically that fear, anxiety and guilt (the sense of condemnation and curse) will always be attached to different “gospels” even in this life. As we will see later in the book, even Christians sometimes experience a sense of condemnation. When they do, it is because, functionally, they are trusting in different “gospels”, different ways to earn salvation. The “present evil age” (v 4) can still influence believers.

Now we can see why Paul adopts such intense and even severe language. The stakes are high—our knowledge of Christ, the truth of the gospel, and the eternal destiny of people’s souls. These are things worth fighting for; worth speaking out over; worth reminding ourselves and others of over and over again. Paul’s bluntness is loving. He is a capital-A Apostle who loves the Lord, the Lord’s gospel, and the Lord’s people. If we love as he did, we’ll understand why he wrote as he did—and be grateful that he did.

The moment you
revise the gospel,
you reverse it.

Questions for reflection

1. How important is gospel truth to you? How is this shown in your life?
2. Why will understanding the true gospel produce anger at false “gospels”?
3. Which of the three modern false-gospel dangers could you or your church most easily fall for?