

Why Don't We Share the Gospel? We Don't Believe It

Galatians 1:6-9, 3:1-5; 1 Corinthians 15:1-2
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As we grow older, inevitably we change. The most obvious changes are physical; we get taller and bigger. When I was in college, I could eat an entire large pizza by myself and not gain a pound. Now, it feels as though I eat two slices of pizza and gain five pounds.

Our tastes and preferences change as well. I can remember not too long ago checking out DVDs of TV shows I used to like when I was a kid that I wanted to share with my own children. We didn't even make it through two episodes of one show. It was terrible! I couldn't believe I used to watch something so bad (and neither could my kids).

Yet another thing that can change as we grow up is what we believe. Our experiences and education often convince us to let go of beliefs that we may have once held dear. To demonstrate, I asked some of our junior high students what they used to believe in when they were little that they no longer believe in now. Some said they used to believe in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, or even the Tooth Fairy, but at a certain point in time—mostly due to the influence of their parents—they learned that these characters do not really exist.

The question is, if it's possible for us to jettison the beliefs we had as children, is it possible for us to stop believing the Gospel as well? And is it possible that one of the reasons we don't share the Gospel is because we don't believe it?

Well, you probably want to know what I mean when I'm suggesting that we don't believe the Gospel. What I don't mean is that we become atheists, or that we join some other world religion, although you and I probably know someone who has. No, what I'm referring to is difficult to talk about because it's so subtle, it's hard to see any danger in it.

The truth is, we often fail to recognize the danger of something if the danger isn't obvious to us. For example, back in the early 90s, there was an epidemic of "phone slamming." ("Phone slamming" means to have your telephone carrier switched without your express permission.) What makes this so dangerous to us is that, once your telephone service is switched, you are subject to the exorbitant rates and fees the company charges. But what made it so difficult to see the danger was that these unscrupulous companies rarely ever asked directly if you wanted to switch. Instead, the companies' agents would call up just like any other annoying marketing call, but the goal was different: it wasn't to convince you to switch phone services, it was simply to get you to say the word "yes." To anything. "Are you pleased with your current service?" "Are you in the middle of dinner?" "Are you wishing I would just hang up?" Then, using that "yes" as a pretense that you had actually agreed to switch phone companies, they would initiate the change, hoping you would not notice it in your billing. This actually happened to a friend of mine, and he ended up paying several hundred dollars and spent more than a month just trying to get his phone service switched back. And all of it started from what he thought was a harmless telemarketing call.

Some of the people the apostle Paul wrote to also thought they were doing something harmless in matters of faith. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul was forced to confront believers who were trading in the Gospel in favor of something else without seemingly knowing it. There are two passages we need to look at. First, turn to chapter 1:6-9:

⁶ I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— ⁷ which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! ⁹ As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

Now turn to 3:1-5:

3 You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. ² I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? ³ Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? ⁴ Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing? ⁵ Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?

Both of these passages make clear that at least some of the Galatians had stopped truly believing the Gospel. That's probably a little unsettling for us. At the same time, though, we probably feel fairly secure in the thought that *we* would never do such a thing.

But we shouldn't feel that way. If anything, it should heighten our vigilance. If people who were taught at the feet of Paul could stop believing the Gospel, then it definitely could happen with us as well. What's more, we might be surprised at how subtle this abandonment of the Gospel actually was. My guess is that if we were able to go back in time to speak with the people Paul confronted in this letter, they would probably say that they hadn't stopped believing the Gospel at all.

You see, the Galatians were never really asked to desert the Gospel. They were simply asked to add something to it. And that made all the difference.

The Galatian church was adversely affected by the teaching of what Bible scholars refer to as "Judaizers." If we had been alive at the time of Paul's writings, we probably would've liked the Judaizers. A lot. These were upstanding guys. Straight as arrows. They had stellar reputations and silver tongues. And they came sharply dressed, with fancy robes and all kinds of tassels. We would've been impressed with their Bible smarts and their pious attitudes. But we also would've been a bit dismayed as well, because we'd soon find out that we weren't allowed to hang out with them.

They'd explain to us that, while it was very nice that we had believed the Gospel, there was still something we lacked: The Law. And since none of us were previously Jews, they'd tell us the rich history of Jewish people following the Law, and how Jesus himself said he did not come to abolish the

Law. They'd say that since God gave the Law to his people to follow, there can be no salvation apart from following the Law.

They'd be so persuasive—again, these guys were no slouches—and what they'd say would seem to make so much sense, that before long at least some of us would be getting circumcised, wearing fancy robes and following the tedium of Jewish law, thinking we were doing something perfectly acceptable and wise.

And we would have stopped believing the Gospel, too. "But wait a minute," you say. "I didn't say I didn't believe in Jesus anymore. How did I stop believing the Gospel?" Let me explain.

Last week, we talked about the importance of knowing the Gospel. We were reminded that the Gospel is historical fact: That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures and was buried. That he rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures. And that, in his risen state, he physically appeared to many people who were willing to testify to what they saw. Paul clearly states in 1 Corinthians 15:2, "By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you." By *this* Gospel. Note that Paul is being very specific here. It is not if you believe in the Gospel generally you will be saved. It is not if you believe in Jesus generally you will be saved. There are specific things we must believe if we are to truly believe God's good news, and those things complete the good news.

The problem was that the Judaizers taught that something needed to be added to the Gospel. They said the Gospel was not complete. And while they did not necessarily discount the need to believe the Gospel, they said that the Galatians also needed to follow the Law in order to be saved.

Anytime we add anything to or subtract anything from the Gospel, we've changed it. And once we've changed it, it's no longer the Gospel. As we just said, the Gospel is based on historical fact. Moreover, though, it is focused on what Jesus has done for us. When we believe the Gospel, we trust in Jesus. But if we say that we must believe the Gospel plus follow a bunch of rules, or that one of the Gospel facts isn't really factual but simply serves as an example for us, we take the focus off from Jesus and put it back on ourselves. And that isn't good news, because we can't do anything to save ourselves.

We are so incapable of helping ourselves and of doing anything right or good on our own that Paul said we are nothing more than dead people walking without Jesus. This is how he described our situation before we believed the Gospel:

"As for you, you were *dead* in your transgressions and sins, ² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient" (Ephesians 2:1-2).

In popular culture, what are the walking dead called? They're called zombies and vampires, creatures that feed on and destroy anything living around them, but have no life in and of themselves. Think about that for a moment.

In the Book of Romans, Paul continues to emphasize our condition without the Gospel by borrowing from the Psalms and Ecclesiastes to create one terrible picture:

¹⁰ As it is written:

“There is no one righteous, not even one;

¹¹ there is no one who understands,
no one who seeks God.

¹² All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good,
not even one.”

¹³ “Their throats are open graves;
their tongues practice deceit.”

“The poison of vipers is on their lips.”

¹⁴ “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”

¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

¹⁶ ruin and misery mark their ways,

¹⁷ and the way of peace they do not know.”

¹⁸ “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” (Romans 3:10-18)

Hopefully, we can now understand why Paul issues such a harsh warning to the Galatians when he says:

⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! ⁹ As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (Gal. 1:8-9)

Paul knows just how dangerous the situation is. He knows that if we are left to our own devices, there is no hope for us. There really are no other options out there for us. If we truly desire to be saved, there is no better way than the Gospel.

Since there is no better way to be saved than the Gospel, we need to be vigilant. We cannot allow ourselves to be lulled into a false sense of security, because there are as many stumbling blocks out there today as there were in the first century, if not more.

The Judaizers are still out there. They probably don't run around wearing fancy robes, but that doesn't mean they aren't wearing fancy suits, driving expensive cars and speaking to sold out stadiums. My guess is that more than one of you this morning has watched them on TV or purchased one of their books. They're attractive, well-spoken, and charismatic even. And they seem to make so much sense. But when they're telling you to “live your best life now,” they're only selling what the Judaizers before them had to sell: rules. “If you follow these rules, then God will bless you.” They've taken the good news—that Christ has done for me what I could not do for myself—and turned it into bad news, because they've put all the work back on me. I can't keep the rules; I will break them, and then I will have nothing, because I can't do anything without Jesus. If I really want the best life now, there's no better way than the Gospel.

Unfortunately, we don't need the Judaizers to entice us away from fully believing the Gospel; we're pretty good at doing the job ourselves. Somehow we arrive at the idea that while the Gospel is good enough for the next life, it isn't sufficient for this one. Yes, it's a wonderful "get-out-of-hell-free" card, but it just doesn't work for us on a day-to-day basis. How do we arrive there? Maybe it's due to God not answering a prayer the way we wanted him to: we wanted a loved one to be healed from a terrible illness, but that person died; or we wanted a particular relationship to work out, but it didn't. Maybe it's because we found that trusting the Gospel complicated our lives more than we thought it would, and our friends or family or co-workers have not been accepting of us being Christians. Maybe we simply like our lives the way they are, and while we have no desire to go to hell, we'd also simply prefer that God keep his meddling hands out of our business until we die. However it's happened, though, we have relegated the Gospel to a small, private corner of our lives so that it can't interfere with the rest of our "living."

I remember that while I was teaching that same men's Bible study that I talked about last week, we touched on the topic of not marginalizing God. One of the men there—a former quarterback for the Dallas Cowboys in the 1960s, and a successful businessman at the time—raised his hand and said, "I think I get what you're saying Walt. You're saying that, when I sit down to make my business goals for the year, I should also make a list of spiritual goals for myself as well." He didn't get it. I said, "Jerry, I think it's great to set some spiritual goals, but I'll go you one further. When it comes time to set business goals, why don't you invite God to make them?" Jerry nearly fell out of his chair. The Gospel was fine when it came to his personal, spiritual life, but for his business too? That was crazy talk. Jerry felt that he needed another strategy to save him and his business in this life.

Again, though, when we do what Jerry was doing, we've added to the Gospel so that it's no longer the Gospel anymore. We've stopped believing the Gospel because we've added some worldly philosophy or personal opinion to it which we believe will save us in this life. And we've turned good news into bad news, because we've placed the burden back on ourselves, a burden we are incapable of dealing with on our own. Friends, we need to take care to remember that there is no better way than the Gospel.