

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON EIGHT)

“APOSTOLIC CONDEMNATION”

GALATIANS 1:8-9

(NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

8 But even if we (or an angel from heaven) should preach a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be condemned to hell!

9 As we have said before, and now I say again, if any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let him be condemned to hell!

On January 3, 2009, **Ligonier Ministries** published an article, written by **Tom Ascol**, entitled, ***“Getting the Gospel Right.”*** I am going to quote at length from the article as a means of introducing this evening’s Lesson.

“Sometimes, what is **not** said speaks more loudly than actual words. The silence, as we say, is deafening. In the opening verses of his letter to the churches of Galatia, the apostle Paul employs this communication technique to underscore the seriousness of the subject at hand. As he does in all of his letters, Paul begins by identifying himself as the author, naming the intended recipients, and pronouncing a blessing on them (**Galatians 1:1-5**).

It is what comes next that is so uncharacteristic for him. Immediately after his introductory comments, and before launching into the body of the letter, Paul writes...**nothing**. He offers no expression of gratitude

to God for them or words of encouragement about their spiritual vitality.

When compared to his other warm greetings...what Paul does **not** say to the Galatians speaks volumes...

Like a soldier rushing into battle with guns blazing, Paul immediately begins contending for the truth of the gospel. His purpose is not simply to win a theological argument. Rather, he is determined to fight for the spiritual lives of the Galatian believers.

Getting the gospel right is crucial. It is a matter of spiritual life and death. If you miss this, it does not matter what you get because you will miss God.

Paul understands this and therefore strongly refutes the false teaching of those who have begun to undermine the Galatians' confidence in the simple gospel that he had preached to them.

That message is all about the finished work of Jesus Christ...The gospel that Paul preached to them proclaimed salvation by grace alone received through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

This message is great news for sinners because it reveals that salvation, from first to last, is God's work and not dependent on anything in us. It eliminates any basis for pride, as well as any cause to despair. Those whom God saves are made right with Him not because of anything they have done or not done, but because they have been '*called...by the grace of Christ*' (verse 6).

On the one hand, the worst of people are genuine candidates for salvation because the only way that God saves is by grace. On the other hand, if the most respectable people are to be saved, it will not be because of any goodness in them but, again, only by the grace of God.

No wonder Paul was *'astonished'* to learn that the Galatians were so quickly and easily being led away from the gospel of God's grace (verse 6). The false teachers insisted that trusting Christ was not enough — to be right with God, a person must also keep certain Old Testament ceremonies. But adding to the gospel is just as disastrous as subtracting from it. Both *'distort the gospel of Christ'* (verse 7).

Any change in the message of Jesus Christ turns it into *'a different gospel'* (verse 6) that keeps people from knowing God. This is why Paul writes with such passion, warning the Galatians never to tolerate anyone — not even an apostle or an angel — who would dare to preach as the gospel, any other message than salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, plus nothing.

Twice Paul says that any creature who distorts the gospel should be *'accursed.'* He literally pronounces *'anathema'* on such a person (verse 9). Those who spread false gospels are worthy of God's damnation.

Paul intends that his use of such strong language should have a sobering affect on us. Misrepresenting the gospel is serious business. Those who believe false gospels will wind up in hell. Those who teach false gospels deserve nothing less.

The churches of Galatia were very young when Paul sent them this letter. Yet, he expected that they — all of the members and not just the leaders — would be doctrinally alert enough to discern the true gospel from counterfeits.

This is the responsibility of every Christian. Like sheep who will follow only the voice of their shepherd, we must learn to recognize the simplicity and fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ and refuse to tolerate any teaching that deviates from it.

Our very lives depend on it."

In verse **8**, Paul writes, “*But even if we (or an angel from heaven) should preach a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be condemned to hell!*”

The Greek word translated “*but*” at the beginning of the sentence, is the strongest adversative conjunction in the Greek. This shows how serious Paul considered the differences to be between his Gospel and the message of the **Judaizers**. He is concerned over the fact that the Galatians probably regarded the Gospel that he preached as not being very different from the message of the **Judaizers**. His own strong sense of the serious difference between the two messages, is responsible for the intensity of his expression. He is desirous of emphasizing in the strongest possible language the contrast between his Gospel of grace and the **Judaizers’** counterfeit “gospel” of works.

Paul wants the Galatians to understand that the controversy is not merely between one teacher and another, but between truth and error. He is waging war against the false teachers and their false message because he loved the truth, and because he loved the Galatian believers whom he had personally led to Christ.

Brothers and sisters, the measure of a man’s ministry is not popularity, or miraculous signs and wonders, but his faithfulness to the Word of God.

The words, “*even if*” in the Greek text, suppose a case which has never occurred. Most commentators see this as Paul’s way of introducing a hypothetical case, something that is highly improbable. It is unthinkable that Paul, any of his associates, or a messenger from heaven, would preach any other Gospel than the Gospel of grace!

By the use of the plural pronoun “*we*,” Paul associates with himself his ministerial colleagues who had combined with him in the preaching of the Gospel. The phrase, “*or an angel from heaven*,” is a deliberate exaggeration for effect by Paul. How contradictory it would be for an

angel from heaven to preach a gospel which is contrary to the Gospel of Christ, Who is seated in Heaven!

John MacArthur comments that in introducing an angel from heaven into the equation, Paul, “was reaching for the most fanciful possibilities imaginable to make his point that absolutely no messenger, no matter how seemingly godly and good, should be believed or followed if his teaching does not square with God-revealed apostolic doctrine. The truth outranks anyone’s credentials, and every teacher or preacher must be evaluated on the basis of what he says, not who he is.”

We must bear in mind what Paul wrote to the believers in Corinth in **2 Corinthians 11:12-15**:

12 And what I am doing I will continue to do, so that I may eliminate any opportunity for those who want a chance to be regarded as our equals in the things they boast about.

13 For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.

14 And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.

15 Therefore it is not surprising his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will correspond to their actions.

(New English Translation)

The **New Living Translation** renders **Galatians 1:8** as follows: “*Let God’s curse fall on anyone, including us or even an angel from heaven, who preaches a different kind of Good News than the one we preached to you.*”

Commenting on the verse, **C.H. Spurgeon** said, “Paul is no fanatic, no raving enthusiast; yet he cannot endure the notion of a false gospel. In his solemn anathema, he includes himself, and all the brethren with

him, yea, and the very angels of God if they 'preach any other gospel.' Let him be accursed, saith he, and so he is."

Brothers and sisters, the Gospel is neither a discussion nor a debate. It is an announcement. It is presented to be received or rejected! It is non-negotiable. A works-based system of salvation elevates man and dethrones God. The Gospel of grace elevates God and dethrones man. Therefore any message that claims to be the Gospel that requires sinners to do anything other than believe in order to be saved, is not the Gospel!

The **Judaizers** were proclaiming a "gospel" which was "*contrary*" to the one that Paul and his companions had preached. The word "*contrary*" is the translation of a Greek word which does not merely mean against or besides, but beyond, in the sense of overstepping a limit into a new area. It points out a specific difference. The message of the **Judaizers** was of an entirely different character than Paul's Gospel. It was intrinsically different.

Paul is adamant that this "contrary gospel" cannot provide salvation because its content differs entirely from the Gospel he received from Christ. If, as the New Testament declares, the Gospel is the good news concerning the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, then our works cannot be added as a requirement for salvation. Jesus has done all the work that is needed to redeem His people. Therefore, the only way to receive salvation is to trust Him and what He has done, without resting on our good deeds at all. To preach anything other than this as a means of salvation is anti-God and anti-Christ!

Paul knew that to add anything to faith alone in Christ alone for salvation would be to deny the sufficiency of His righteousness and atonement, and so he is led to pronounce a curse on anyone who teaches a gospel other than the Gospel of grace. Paul was even willing for the curse to fall on himself should he deviate from the Gospel of grace.

Listen again to his words: *“But even if we (or an angel from heaven) should preach a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be condemned to hell!”*

The word *“condemned”* is a translation of the Greek word **anathema**: (**an-ath’-em-ah**). **John Gresham Machen**, the American New Testament scholar, explained that the fundamental idea, when a thing is called an **anathema**, is that the thing has been taken from ordinary use and has been handed over to God. If it is a good thing, it has been handed over to Him for His use; if it is a bad thing, it has been handed over to Him for destruction: but in either case, human beings have no more to say about it; it is taken out of ordinary relationships and is *“devoted”* to God. So in **Galatians 1:8**, Paul is saying that the punishment of a person who attempts to pervert the Gospel of Christ is in God’s hands. Such a person should be regarded as being beyond human power to help. He or she should be regarded as having fallen into the state spoken of in **Hebrews 10:31**: *“It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God”* (**New English Translation**).

The phrase, *“let him be condemned”* is actually a command in the present imperative calling for those who distort the Gospel to be continually cursed! A minister who requires sinners to obey the law, or to perform any work whatsoever as a requirement for salvation, is leading others to a Christ-less eternity and he is deserving of such a destiny himself!

Commenting on the word **anathema** the Greek New Testament scholar **Kenneth Wuest** wrote the following: *“In a spiritual sense it denotes one who is alienated from God by sin. It cannot refer here to ecclesiastical excommunication, for angels are included. The epistles of Paul attach to the word the idea of spiritual death. Its use in **Romans 9:3** where Paul says that he could wish himself accursed from Christ for his brethren's sake, associates it with the further idea of separation from Christ and destruction for all eternity, which is the fate of the unsaved.”*

Paul's language is very strong and his severity has caused concern for many readers of this epistle. But when we pause to consider what is at stake, his strong language is understandable. By substituting man centered performance in the place of the finished work of Christ, as the basis for acquiring righteousness, false teachers compromise the very essence and foundation of the Gospel.

In verse **9**, Paul addresses, not a hypothetical scenario as appears to be the case in verse **8**, but a real situation. He writes, "*As we have said before, and now I say again, if any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let him be condemned to hell!*"

Though it might seem that verse **9** is merely a repetition of the curse pronounced in verse **8**, there are important differences. In verse **8** the phrase, "*if any one is preaching,*" is in a construction in the Greek which indicates that Paul was speaking hypothetically. In verse **9** however, the words "*if any one is preaching,*" are now in a construction which indicates that persons were **actually** preaching a false gospel.

Another difference is that Paul begins verse **9** with the phrase, "*As we have said before.*" The words "*said before*" are the translation of a Greek word, which means, "to say beforehand, to predict." In verse **9** it has the idea of "to say before" in the sense of saying something in times past, since it is used in contrast to the word "*now.*" This is not a reference to what Paul said in verse **8** but to a previous occasion when Paul had made this same statement. The construction in the Greek points necessarily to an earlier time in contrast to the present. It was either said on a previous visit to the Galatian churches or in a previous letter.

At some occasion in the past, Paul had felt the need of warning the Galatian believers against the dangers of false teaching which apparently had not yet actually begun. He had warned the Galatians about the **Judaizers** even before they had infiltrated the church. This makes the defection of the Galatians all the more inexcusable.

As in verse **8**, Paul again issues a command in the **present imperative**

which is a command that those who are propogating a false gospel be eternally condemned to hell.

We will conclude our Lesson with the words of Dr. **John MacArthur**:

"There is a word there repeated twice, it is the word "accursed." It is the Greek word **anathema**. It means devoted to God for destruction. The gospel is the good news about salvation. Anyone who distorts the good news about salvation is cursed. This is severe language. It is as harsh as the Word of God ever gets, pronouncing a damning double curse on anyone who distorts or alters the gospel. The gospel, the good news of salvation in Christ, by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, is the only way that sinners can escape hell and enter heaven. It is by believing the true gospel.

Obviously, Satan, wanting to hold onto those that are in his kingdom of darkness, wants to confuse and deceive and distort the gospel. This then becomes a major enterprise of Satan, the distortion of the gospel, so that people are believing something that is not true, does not save, and they end up in hell, saying, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we do this, and didn't we do that?' only to hear, 'Depart from Me, I never knew you, you workers of iniquity.'

The apostle Paul here has no hesitation, no reluctance. He starts these severe verses, this very fierce declaration of divine punishment without any reservation. This is so direct, so confrontational, so explicit that, frankly, this kind of forceful pronounciation of damnation is just not what you would hear preachers preach today...This passage is extremely disturbing to the post-modern mind. It is extremely disturbing to the tolerant world in which we live. But it is absolutely necessary, because salvation is at stake, and it only happens through belief in the true gospel."