

Self Defense

Galatians 1:11-24

One of the more memorable experiences of being a very young, 26 year old pastor in a small midwestern town was when two of the older widows in the congregation gave Sharon and me their tickets to a high school basketball game. They had season tickets, and this was Indiana. High school basketball really is something about as important as it can be. If you have seen the movie Hoosiers a number of years ago, the context of that is very accurate. High school basketball teams in Indiana were ranked with as much notoriety as people in the south give the college football top twenty. So Sharon and I took our seats in that coliseum, a separate stand-alone building which had been built decades earlier for the high school basketball team. We sat down where those two well known and respected ladies had sat for 40 years or more.

The initial fear, of course, of our neighbors sitting near us was that the ladies had died! Those other long-time season ticket holders couldn't imagine any other reason why their friends would miss a game. But the real sense that we had throughout that game was that we really didn't belong there. We didn't have the right to be there. It was as if we had to justify our presence, since we were obviously outsiders. And to them, we looked so young. They probably thought we were just out of high school ourselves, and almost unwilling to believe I was a pastor.

That was something typical of my experiences during the years of that ministry, my first experience after I was ordained to the ministry. Because of my youth, I lacked an outward credibility. Because of my inexperience, I had to present something of a self-defense in order to gain that credibility. I actually remember when I turned 30, because it gave me such an immediate answer to

people who questioned how old I was. Well, I said at the time, "I am 30." That was a helpful answer, given the fact that I probably still looked like I was in my low 20s. Now, despite my increasing age, I'm thankful for the credibility that age provides.

In that context, I understand what Paul is doing in our text this afternoon. So much more than my somewhat insignificant struggles to gain credibility as a young pastor, Paul is determined to give a sufficient self-defense so that he might be received with apostolic authority by the churches of Galatia. He had to prove himself. More importantly, actually, not so much that he would gain credibility personally, but that his words would be received as the word of God.

He begins with a necessary denial. He has to deny a charge that would be easy to understand, an accusation that people would make against him. Remember, Jesus came to the Jews. Jesus was a Jew. His disciples were Jewish. And so the foundation of the church, the apostles were Jewish. And those Jewish apostles had a very important qualification, they had been with Jesus. They were the eyewitness testimony which identified Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. They had spent years with Jesus. But Paul? He was not a disciple. In fact, as everyone knew, he was a persecutor. And now, years later, how can he claim such authority. Remember how this book began,

v.1 Paul, an apostle (not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead), 2 and all the brethren who are with me, To the churches of Galatia."

And remember how strongly and urgently he wrote.

v.6 "I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel...9 As we

have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.”

Strong words. But who is this man? And why should we listen to him? After all, the accusation must have been made against him, that he is simply teaching and preaching,

I. MAN’S GOSPEL.

A man’s words, not God’s. A mere man. Only a man. No one with any authority or proper apostolic credentials.

Of course, in our day, that wouldn’t matter. We make heroes almost instantly. If you do one famous thing, one act of valor, if you gain fame in the entertainment industry or in professional athletics, then you are a hero. You’re a role model. You’re a spokesman. We don’t particularly care about credentials anymore, since we so often worship the cult of fame and personality. But Paul didn’t have that luxury. He writes to the Galatians fully aware that what he writes might well be ignored and rejected as the mere words of men. He would have fears that the gospel he preaches might be rejected as man’s gospel. Thus his vigorous and detailed self-defense.

v.11-12

So emphatic. “Read my lips,” he would say in the parlance of our day. This is not man’s gospel. The issue is one of origin.

A. A question of origin.

Where did it come from? Where did “Paul’s gospel” originate? The question might be asked, “How do you know it is true it is the gospel?” How do you know that what Paul teaches is the gospel? How do you know?

If you are familiar with the study of theology or philosophy, the subject here is epistemology. How do you know it’s true? And whether or not you have ever heard that big word, the idea is vital. How do you know what is true? Most broadly, the question for us is, “How do you know the Bible is true?” Not just Paul’s letters, but the whole of the Bible.

Perhaps you would say, “That’s how I was raised.” Perhaps you would say, “That’s what I have always believed,” but that still doesn’t answer the question. How do you know?

That is the question that causes many college age young adults to give up their faith, to abandon what they have always been taught and always believed. Because they can’t answer that question. How do you know? There are many people today committed to challenging Christians to answer that question, in the hope of undermining their faith and devotion to God.

But Paul gives us the answer. It is his own personal, self-defense. How do you know the gospel is true? That is really a question of origins. The origin of the gospel is not man! Verse 11. Instead, verse 12, it is a revelation.

Peter would later give a theological description of what Paul describes here.

2 Peter 1:19 “And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, 20 knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. 21 For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

It is a question of origin. It is the ultimate question for

everything you are taught, everything you believe. Is the origin man? Or is it God? So Paul's self-defense is clear. "The gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel."

So what was the influence behind Paul's understanding of the gospel? Not just the origin, but,

B. A question of influence.

Who were his teachers? Paul's answer is clear. He didn't make it up. It didn't come from his own interpretation. And it didn't come by the influence of other men. It came by revelation.

It is easy to fall under the influence of other men. That is rather normal in our experiences, though we ought to resist it somewhat as well, for whatever influence a professor or writer might have on our thinking, and for that matter whatever influence my teaching might have upon any of you, the influence that matters has to be God.

So Paul says so carefully, verse 12, "nor was I taught it..." This gospel he proclaims was not something taught him by another man.

I should note this text also gives us historical detail not found anywhere else, so it is very interesting on that level as well. There is clearly,

C. A recognition of the past.

His past as a faithful Jewish Pharisee, a past which he renounces now that he is a Christian. There is a sense here in which he gives his testimony to gain credibility with the Jews, since he has been a leader among them, but also to reject what is left of the Jewish religion when it rejects Jesus the Messiah. So Paul says,

v.13-14

So as far as the traditions of the fathers goes, Paul was just fine. But his own self-defense now was necessary. And was he says is so appropriate.

II. AN APPROPRIATE DEFENSE.

It is so timely and relevant to the churches at Galatia who were troubled by this false gospel of the Judaizers which declared the necessity of conformity to the Jewish ceremonial system including circumcision.

So Paul's defense is plain. He received the message of gospel by revelation from God during,

A. A solitary time in the desert.

He didn't learn from any man. He didn't gain his apostolic authority from any man. All of his credibility came as a consequence of this time in the desert of Arabia.

v.16-18

Only after three years did he join the apostolic band. Only after three years did he presume to make himself known as an apostle. And that, not without difficulty.

Acts 9:26 "And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. 27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. 28 So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. 30 And when the

brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.”

So little details of this three year period. Luke omits all reference to it in the book of Acts, but here in Galatians, when Paul is determined to give an adequate self-defense, that solitary time plays a crucial part. Indeed, it was the foundation of his introduction to the other apostles. It was the foundation of his credentials to be an apostle.

B. An apostolic introduction.

v.18-22

So now he is known. According to Galatians 2:1, it would be another 14 years before he was to go back to Jerusalem and begin what we call his missionary journeys, but here at this point of the letter to the Galatians, the issue was his credibility. The issue was the legitimacy his position as an apostle. And with all the historical references, what really stands out in Paul’s self-defense is his emphasis upon,

III. THE WORK OF GOD’S GRACE.

In his life!

Notice how he describes his own conversion.

v.15

So the point Paul makes so well, with his own example, is that we are saved by grace, not by works. And certainly not by the Jewish works of obedience to the law. God called him by his grace. He who was “extremely zealous for the traditions of his fathers” was actually redeemed on the basis of the grace of God. The gift of God. He who was “a Pharisee of Pharisees” by his own effort and work would become a Christian solely by the work of God’s grace.

That testimony becomes even clearer in,

Phil. 3:4 “...though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith — 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

It is all of grace. It is all about Christ. Everything that we count to our own credit must be counted as loss. Rubbish. More explicitly to be translated dung, excrement. That’s the value that Paul puts upon the place of human achievement and accomplishment when it comes to becoming a Christian. And that is his point as an apostle, called by God to preach to the Gentiles particularly. The work of the gospel is God’s work. The merit within the gospel is the merit of Jesus. What had to be done for you to be saved and for me to be saved was done by Christ alone. And the reason he did it was because of grace!

Beloved, that is what the gospel is all about. And in that context, Paul identifies,

A. God’s sovereign election.

God chose Paul. And not only to be a Christian, but as a Christian, to be an apostle. There was no separating those two things.

v.15-16a

Reminds you a bit of the prophet Jeremiah, doesn't it?

Jer. 1:4 "Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Why is the Bible so full of this emphasis upon God's choices before birth? Surely, that leaves the focus upon God's sovereignty. There was nothing Paul did to earn or deserve his calling. He wasn't even born! Ephesians 1 makes that point with reference to salvation in general, specifically God's election.

Eph. 1:3 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will."

The idea is a magnification of the work of grace, a work of grace so great that it is traced backed to the eternal will of God, the eternal purpose of God which he formulated in eternity. Before the foundation of the world.

God chose Paul. That was his testimony. Called unto salvation. And called unto the apostleship, called to a ministry among the Gentiles. Called by God, effectually called. Before he was even born. In other words, God did the calling. God called Paul to be an apostle. It had nothing to do with him or with his own credentials. And Paul never forgot that, for when he was

giving Timothy his own marching orders for the next generation of leadership within the church, we read,

1 Tim. 1:12 "I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, 13 though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14 and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 15 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. 16 But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. 17 To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."

That's what a declaration of God's grace does for you. That's what an emphasis upon grace does for you. You end up singing a doxology. To God be honor and glory forever and ever!

So that's Paul's testimony—God did it! God saved him and God called him. And therefore, the gospel he preaches would be a gospel he received. By...

B. God's self-revelation.

v.16

Did you notice how "the gospel" became personalized. Paul says, "God was pleased to reveal his son to me." Jesus. Paul was to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, which means that Paul was to preach Jesus to the Gentiles. How easy it is to forget that those two things are essentially one and the same. Jesus is the gospel. The gospel is Jesus. And Paul received it by a work of God's grace in his life. With a specific purpose.

C. God's specific purpose.

Verse 16, to preach to the Gentiles. To preach to the nations. To proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Also, v.23

Notice as this chapter ends, how Paul makes so clear.

D. God's ultimate goal.

v.24

Beloved, that is such a healthy self-evaluation. That is such a healthy self-awareness. If that's how you want to define self-image, then call this self-image. It is the very essence of a healthy view of your own life, and your own usefulness in life. And it has all ultimate reference to God. "They glorified God because of me."

Surely that is my goal, my motive in my ministry among you. That is an edifying thought for all of us, a useful way for everyone of you to think of yourselves. It is a very useful motivation for the exercise and discipline of your own life. It keeps you from pride, and from the false humility that would cause you to despair of your own usefulness or dignity as a creature made in God's image. The point is simple, with deeply profound psychological implications. Let me urge you to think in terms for yourself, and to think in terms of this motivation in your Christian life and witness. Live out your life in your relationships with other people so that they will have occasion to glorify God because of you!

Do you see how that works? It is not that you are so great, or that you are so important. It is not that you ought to be puffed up, or be motivated by any desire for your own advancement. It is all about God and his glory. So your job becomes a witness. A testimony. You make God known, by your life. By your words

and actions. And when others come to know you, they see the grace of God at work such that they give glory to God himself.

That's Paul's self-defense as an apostle. God sent him to preach to the Gentiles, and when they heard the gospel, they glorified God because of him. It wasn't Paul's gospel. It wasn't man's gospel. It was all of God! It was all for God.

That was a lesson I learned as a very young, newly ordained minister of the gospel almost 32 years ago. That is a experience I was able to renew with such joy when I came here three years ago now. That is my calling. That is the definition of whatever success I might enjoy. I would be an instrument of his grace. Nothing more, which keeps me humble. And nothing less, which keeps me motivated. An instrument of God, responsible to be faithful. If God has worked a work of grace in your life, may you learn always to say the very same thing of yourselves, and be able to say it sincerely. "They glorified God because of me."