

Rev. Jerry Deck
Galatians 1:1 - 24

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Galatians

One of the things that I remember from when I was a child was my parents' ability to tell me that I was in big trouble but to do it in such a way that no one else would know. So, if we were in a worship service and were acting up, it would appear that my mom was just affectionately putting her hand on my leg, but in reality it felt like my leg was about to pop off because she was squeezing it so hard. Or, like a ventriloquist, they'd be smiling at others while telling me to just wait until we get home.

Of course, as a parent now I have also begun developing that ability. Times when our children act up and it's so embarrassing and yet you don't want to make a big deal of it and so, through gritted teeth you tell them "Enough" and then you get in the car, all smiles and waving goodbye to everyone as you back up from the driveway and then as you put the vehicle in forward, making sure that all the windows are firmly closed, you have at it. "What were you thinking?! They're going to think you're being raised pack of wolves the way you were acting in there!" And on and on it goes.

This is exactly the feeling I got when I began to look over this first chapter of Galatians. Paul begins with the words and the look of backing up the driveway waving and smiling. "To the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory for ever an ever. Amen.

The "Amen" is when Paul rolls up the windows and shifts the car from reverse to drive. "I am astonished you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel-not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!"

You see what I mean? While Paul may start out sweetly it doesn't take him long to lay into the Galatians. In fact of all the gospels that Paul wrote this is the only one that does not begin with a thanksgiving for whomever he is writing the letter to. Clearly the Galatians were not on Paul's good side. And why is Paul so upset?

Well, we'll get into more of the details in the weeks to come, but suffice it to say that it is because there appear to be some who have entered the ranks of the church and who have begun saying that in order to *really* be saved you have to *do* something beyond simply accepting the grace of Christ. In other words, Paul is angry, really, really angry because they are not taking grace seriously enough and because of that he is furious.

I'll be honest in saying that it almost feels a bit odd, doesn't it- to get so angry about grace. It's easy to think that surely there are bigger deals than this to get excited and angry over. I mean

think about all the different things that church folks get angry about (go ahead and think about it!). Getting angry about grace is not usually toward the top of the list (if it's on the list at all). One commentator pointed out that perhaps that's because of the fact that we are such an achievement-oriented people that it doesn't really bother us all that much to tamper a bit with grace and to somehow give ourselves a role in our salvation. Adages like, "God helps those who help themselves" and "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" and "there are no free rides" well they're not in the scripture but you couldn't blame many for thinking they are. And yet Paul is adamant, absolutely adamant, that if we get this beginning part wrong then we are in deep, deep trouble.

While I don't think I've ever fired a gun, I have a feeling it's a bit like that. If you move the barrel just a bit, just a smidge, it may not seem like much at first, but then as you go out fifty, then 150 then 200 yards, the bullet ends up in a place far, far away from the target. It may not initially seem like much to just add a little bit of ourselves into the notion of salvation, but what happens is that if you begin with your role in salvation as you continue down that road you end up diverting further and further away from what the Christian faith is about. You will end up making this about what you have done instead of what God has done, which of course is the exact opposite of what we are called to do. Now there will be a lot more time to talk about grace as we get further into Galatians, but it's important to see that this is where this passage begins and this is why Paul is so upset.

So, one of the things happening in the church in Galatia is that grace is being questioned. But we can also surmise that the churches are questioning not only grace, but Paul himself. It appears they've grown skeptical about Paul's credentials and whether or not he is the genuine thing. They also seem to be asserting that he is someone who is just going around and looking for human approval. (As a quick aside I hope you caught what happens in verse 10. Paul goes off on the Galatians and then says in verse 10, "Am I now seeking human approval...?" In other words, someone who is seeking human approval wouldn't just say what I just said, would they?!)

So here we have Paul being disparaged, belittled and questioned. And the question, of course, is how will he respond? What does he think will be effective in helping the Galatians, who he clearly cares about, hear and understand him? Now Paul is often seen as this logical rhetorician who specializes in theology and philosophy and he certainly does focus on that in his letters. But what is interesting here is that this is not where he begins. Rather he begins to tell them his story. He tells them about how he was raised, how successful he was. But then God called him, and Paul received the grace of Christ and realized that his mission was to help the Gentiles understand who Jesus was so that they might also receive Christ's grace. How he met Cephas (who is Peter) in Jerusalem and how others finally began to see that the one who was once persecuting Christians had undergone a remarkable transformation and is now preaching for and about Christ.

What is Paul doing here? How is he trying to connect with those who seem to have either forgotten about or never really understood the grace of Jesus? He decides to tell them his story. Or to put it in terms that the church has sometimes used- he gives his testimony.

Now testimony is not a word that we oftentimes hear in most Presbyterian churches. But when I was growing up giving a testimony was a pretty common part of the church service. With some frequency we would be encouraged to, much like Paul, testify to how we'd seen God work in our lives. The stories were varied. Sometimes they were shocking and sometimes they were more pedestrian. I've even been a part of church services where they would ask visitors to stand and, after they had done so, would bring them a microphone and ask them to give a testimony. (In fact, I'd like us to do that this morning!) Again though we don't spend much time around the topic of talking about our faith, about telling our story, about giving our testimony.

There are, I'm sure, many reasons for this. Sometimes it's because we may have had bad experiences in our past where perhaps someone has shared their faith with us in a way that made us uncomfortable. Or perhaps it's because it feels awkward or we don't want to offend people. And sometimes, and this may be most times (if we're honest), it's because we don't really know what we would say. Would we, like Paul, be able to tell someone about how we've seen God work in our lives or about the grace we've received from Jesus or would we be stumped with whether or not we have something to share? Do we have a story to tell?

The reason I think this is an important question is because in our day and age story is incredibly important. In a world where it seems that everyone is trying to sell you something and at a time, as Scott mentioned a few weeks ago, when the church is so often looked at as being hypocritical it is vital that we, like Paul, have stories to tell if we want to be heard. Yes, it's important to be able to tell people what you believe, but it is also critical to be able to tell others how you have experienced God and how God has made a difference in your life. In some sense, of course, this should come somewhat naturally to us-to tell people of the how the good news, the exciting news, of Jesus has shaped us.

A decade or so ago I took my first trip to London. I was pretty excited about it, having heard so much about it and seen so many pictures of it. After arriving at the train station I immediately hopped aboard the tube that took me straight to the hostel where I was staying. So, I hadn't really seen the sights yet because I'd been underground. But after dropping off my stuff at the hostel I decided to finally venture out. The sun was setting as I grabbed my map and my Rick Steves book. The book gave this great little walk to take that went along the Thames and so the first thing I had to do was to find the river that goes through the heart of London. By the time I reached the river darkness had settled in. As I got to the bridge I looked to the left and thought I could make out some sights, but then I looked over to the right and there, in all of its' lit up splendor was Tower Bridge. I mean I'd seen it in movies and picture, but to be this close and to see the real thing it was absolutely breathtaking. It really was an amazing sight. And as I stared at it I almost couldn't help continually looking to the left and the right, not because I wanted to stop staring at it, but because I wanted to tell someone, to share with someone, this incredible experience. But, since I was alone there was really no one to share it with.

My point is that when we really experience something amazing and beautiful like Tower Bridge (or like grace!) there should be something inside of us that finds it almost impossible to not want to share it with others. As Tom Long puts it, "We see the hand of God at work in life, and we don't want other people to miss it." And so one of the questions that comes to mind

after hearing the testimony of Paul is whether or not we also have this joy and excitement of telling people our own experience of grace.

Now I don't ask that in order to make you feel guilty if you don't, because quite honestly I have a feeling there are many of us here who simply may not know what they would say, who may think, you know I'm not really all that excited to share how I've experienced grace. The easy thing, of course, would be to think "Well maybe that's because I don't really have anything to share or because God's not been at work or because I haven't experienced that grace." And I might be willing to concede that except for one thing.

Which is that on that particular night as I stood there on that bridge looking at Tower Bridge in the distance, it's not completely true that I was alone. Oh no, while I didn't know anyone there, there were actually a lot of people walking back and forth right by me, but you know what? They couldn't have cared less about the beautiful bridge that was just down the river a bit. Maybe they'd seen it too many times or perhaps they were busy going this way or that, but while I stood there wanting to point to it and scream, "Look at that, it's amazing" they just kept going by as if they didn't notice it all.

My point is that just because you may not think you have something to say, or just because you may not be able to immediately get excited about the way that God is at work in your life or that you have experienced grace doesn't mean that God isn't at work or that you haven't experienced grace. No, it probably just means that you have simply lost sight of it amidst having seen it so many times or just being too busy going this way or that. And so then a part of our job here at ZPC and here during worship is to be that obnoxious tourist who won't let you forget or ignore the beautiful thing that is right there if you but take the time to look at it again and anew. To help you to tell your story, your testimony.

I frequently talk about the fact that what we do in here is practice for what we do when we go out in the world. This week I was looking over a book called "Testimony" and one of the things it suggested was that what we do here is a dress rehearsal or a language school where we learn how to talk about our faith, so that when we go out into the world we will be able to actually do it. So then, a part of our job as the leadership of ZPC is to make sure that we are given opportunities to practice or rehearse our story. In other words, one of our jobs as pastors is not just to be equipment managers, as I mentioned a few weeks ago, but is also to be obnoxious tourists that force you all to stop what you're doing and to ask if you've noticed the beauty of God and his grace in your life lately. And so, I want us to take a couple minutes and on the paper that you've been given I want you to write down something in your life that you think speaks about the grace of Jesus or the way you've seen him at work in your life, just as Paul was able to speak of God's grace and call on his own life. So, let's do that now.

Now, if you struggled with coming up with something, again, that doesn't mean that God's grace hasn't found you or that God isn't at work. It probably just means that we're not spending enough time paying attention. So, I want you to take the card with you and think about it this week. I know it's easy to forget to do these things, so I also want to give you a visual image that you can take with you to remind you of your assignment. A while back I told

you that I had gone through Scott's office when I was bored and when I did I found something that he wore when he was in France last year. Here it is: (show slide). So, as you go through this week and if you forget what we talked about I want you to remember that picture, to remember that Scott and I are obnoxious tourists who are trying to get you to notice God and his grace, so that when you are given opportunities to share with others what difference it makes that God is in your life and that you have experienced grace you will, like Paul, have a story to tell.