

# LESSON ONE

## *Only One Gospel*

### **FOCAL TEXT**

Galatians 1:1-10

### **BACKGROUND**

Galatians 1:1-10

### **MAIN IDEA**

Only the gospel of the grace of God in Christ is worthy of our commitment.

### **QUESTION TO EXPLORE**

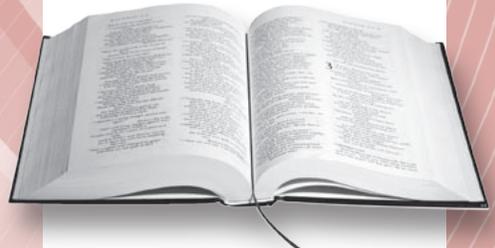
At what point does acceptance of differing viewpoints turn into a denial of the gospel of Christ?

### **STUDY AIM**

To identify current substitutes for the gospel of the grace of God in Christ and describe how to respond in light of Paul's strong statements

### **QUICK READ**

Paul implored the Christians in the Galatian churches to remain committed to the simple gospel upon which the churches were established.



Most people understand the importance of being tolerant. After all, even Gamaliel called the Sanhedrin to be tolerant with these new followers of Jesus because this new movement might actually be from God (Acts 5:34–39). We too want to be tolerant. Nevertheless, we may worry that in being tolerant of other belief systems and the people who hold them we might eventually go too far and find ourselves on a slippery slope that leads us away from our own beliefs.

Paul accused the Galatian Christians of making that very mistake. Intolerance was not their problem. On the contrary, they were too tolerant. They were so receptive to the false teaching of those who were “trying to pervert the gospel of Christ” (Galatians 1:7) that they moved onto the slippery slope that led them away from the teaching about Jesus that Paul taught them earlier. Therefore, Paul wrote this incendiary epistle to call them back to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## GALATIANS 1:1–10

<sup>1</sup> Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—<sup>2</sup> and all the brothers with me,

To the churches in Galatia:

<sup>3</sup> Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>4</sup> who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, <sup>5</sup> to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

<sup>6</sup> 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—<sup>7</sup> which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. <sup>8</sup> 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! <sup>9</sup> 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!

<sup>10</sup> Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.

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## Paul's Calling (1:1–2)

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Few scholars question the Pauline authorship of the Letter to the Galatian churches. In fact, it is perhaps Paul's most personal letter. The section from 1:11 to 2:14 is clearly autobiographical. The references made and the statements given clearly point to the Apostle Paul.

The opening verses are more than just a standard way to open this correspondence to the Galatian Christians. Paul used these opening words to counter the charges of his enemies who questioned his calling. Paul's conviction that Jews and Gentiles alike can experience salvation by faith alone fueled their opposition. Even though the church affirmed Paul's position at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), the battle was not over with the decision of the council. These who wanted stricter requirements for becoming Christians were called Judaizers, and they continued their demand that circumcision and submission to the Jewish laws must be added to Paul's offer of grace. These Judaizers seemed to have special success among the churches of Galatia. So Paul wrote this Galatian letter to reprove this legalism and regain the Galatian churches for the gospel.

To support their case, these Judaizers made three specific charges against Paul. First, they charged that Paul was not an apostle. Paul answered this charge in Galatians 1 and 2. He affirmed that God called him (see Gal. 1:15). He affirmed further that the other apostles acknowledged his authority (see 2:7). Finally, he proved his worth by remaining firm at Antioch (see 2:11).

Second, Paul's opponents charged that his gospel was not the true gospel because he had no right to set aside the law of God. Paul answered this charge in chapters 3 and 4. Using the example of Abraham, he pointed out that God accounts a person righteous because of faith, not works. The gospel does not set aside the law but fulfills its original intention.

Finally, Paul's opponents claimed that Paul's gospel led to loose living. If people thought the law was no longer in effect, they would feel free to do whatever they wanted. Paul answered this charge in chapters 5 and 6. The compulsion of the Christian life, Paul affirmed, was not the law without but the Spirit within. Christian freedom is not freedom to do as we please but freedom to do as we ought. The Christian is one who walks in the Spirit, and the result is not immorality but righteous living.

These answers to the charges against him, given in their fullest form in the remainder of the letter, are given in capsule form in verse 1. There Paul identified himself as “an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.”

### Paul’s Conviction (1:3–5)

Paul’s calling was rooted in a conviction about who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. Paul connected his opening expression of “grace and peace” to “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3). By tying together the Father and the Son as the source of grace, Paul acknowledged the divine nature of Jesus. Jesus is not inferior to God in his person, and neither is Jesus secondary to God in his work. He stands as an equal to God the Father and is equally involved in the provision of salvation.

So what did Jesus do for us? First of all, Jesus took the initiative “to rescue us from the present evil age” (1:4). In that statement, we see the difference between Christianity and every other religious system in the

## GALATIA

What did Paul mean when he referred to “Galatia” (Gal. 1:2)? “Galatia” can be understood in one of two ways. The term can refer to the older kingdom of Galatia, or it can denote the Roman province of Galatia. This controversy of identity has led to two different theories concerning the recipients of Paul’s letter. The *North Galatia* theory suggests Paul was writing to the churches in the independent kingdom of Galatia named for the Gauls who settled there in about the third century B.C. The *South Galatia* theory suggests Paul was writing to the churches in the Roman province of Galatia, to the south of the kingdom of Galatia. I believe the weight of evidence supports the South Galatian view. If this is correct, the churches Paul addressed in this letter were the churches in Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe, churches he established on his first missionary journey (Acts 14).

world. Every other religious system is based on what humanity does to initiate God's love. The movement is always from humanity to God. In contrast, Christianity announces what God has done to make humanity right with him. The movement is from God to humanity. That difference marks the difference between legalism and grace and the difference between salvation by works and salvation by faith.

What else did Jesus do? Sometimes the New Testament speaks of Jesus ransoming us from the bondage of our slavery to sin (Mark 10:45). Sometimes the New Testament speaks of Jesus as giving himself as a sacrifice to cover our sins (Hebrews 9:11–12). Sometimes the New Testament speaks of Jesus as pleading our case before the heavenly Judge as our advocate (1 John 2:1). In this passage, Paul spoke of Jesus as our rescuer. Jesus came “to rescue us” (Gal. 1:4). We need to be rescued because we are a part of “the present evil age” (1:4).

Jesus rescues us, Paul affirmed, by giving himself for our sins (1:4). In that phrase we see both the measure and the motive of Jesus' sacrifice. Jesus was willing to give himself for us. He was motivated by our need. It is not the righteousness in our lives that inspired Jesus' unparalleled sacrifice of his perfect life. It is the *absence* of righteousness. Jesus gave himself “for our sins.” Humankind has a problem from which we cannot extricate ourselves in a million lifetimes, and so Jesus did for us what we can never do for ourselves: Jesus gave himself “for our sins.”

The final phrase in verse 4 has great significance. Jesus rescues us from this present evil age “according to the will of our God and Father.” This final phrase reminds us that God is not a reluctant benefactor who has to be persuaded, almost against his will, to go along with the plan for humanity's salvation. The whole thing is God's idea. It is God's plan. This final phrase also affirms that Jesus is God's plan. He is not *one* of God's plans. He is not just *the best* of God's plans. Jesus *is* God's plan. It is the will of the Father that each of us should be rescued from this evil age through personal faith in Jesus Christ. That was Paul's conviction.

### Paul's Concern (1:6–10)

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Paul's conviction gave birth to a concern that he immediately expressed to the Christians at Galatia, a concern that caused Paul to be “astonished” (1:6). The word “astonished” expresses amazement over something we

do not understand and do not expect. Paul was “astonished” that the Galatians had turned so quickly from the gospel he preached (a gospel rooted in the conviction described in the previous section), to another gospel.

Paul used a play on words we usually miss in the English translation. Two Greek words can be translated “another.” One, *heteron*, means another of a *different* kind. A second, *allos*, means another of the *same* kind. If I have an apple in one hand, and someone gives me a peach, I say: “Here is another piece of fruit—*heteron*—another of a *different* kind.” If I have an apple in one hand and someone gives me another apple, I say, “Here is another piece of fruit—*allos*—another of the *same* kind. Both words appear in verses 6–7.<sup>1</sup> In essence, Paul concluded: *I am amazed you would so soon turn to another gospel of a different kind that is not another gospel of the same kind.* Any other gospel besides the one he preached was *heteron*—another gospel of a different kind—or in reality, not another gospel at all.

Paul recognized that some false teachers had incited the Galatians to turn from the true gospel (1:7). Paul leveled two charges against these false teachers. First, he accused them of disturbing the church. They were “throwing [the church] into confusion” (1:7). The Greek word means to *agitate or to stir up fear and uncertainty*. Second, Paul accused them of perverting the gospel (1:7). The Greek word means *to change something into something altogether different*.

Paul added this word of warning: “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!” (1:9). Paul recommended a narrow-minded approach to the gospel that accepted only one gospel and that was the gospel contained in the conviction expressed in Galatians 1:3–5.

Paul called for the Galatian Christians to be narrow-minded about two important matters that are at the core of the gospel. First, they should be narrow-minded about *the One who saves us*. The New Testament from beginning to end is narrow-minded and intolerant on this point. As Peter put it in his sermon in Acts 4: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). If we are true to the New Testament, we must be narrow-minded about the One who saves us. We must also be narrow-minded about *the way Jesus saves us*. The New Testament from beginning to end is narrow-minded and intolerant on this point. Paul

expressed this conviction like this in his Ephesian letter: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9). If we are true to the New Testament, we must be narrow-minded about the way Jesus saves us.

Tolerance, of course, has a place in life. We do not need to be like the person who was so narrow-minded he could look through a keyhole with both eyes at the same time. But on these two matters, we need to be as narrow-minded and intolerant as the New Testament. Only through Jesus is salvation available, and only through faith can we get in on it. That is the gospel. Any other message is not really the gospel at all.

Paul’s unwavering support for this one gospel was not motivated by a desire for public approval. Instead, he was motivated by a desire to please God (Gal. 1:10). Life is a stage on which we act out our lives, and all choose their audience. Some choose humanity as their audience. Their primary pursuit is the plaudits of their peers. They are, as Paul called them, people “trying to please men” (1:10). Others choose God as their audience. Their foremost fascination is the favor of their Father. They are people who are seeking to *please God*. Paul put himself in the latter camp. He defended the gospel revealed in Jesus Christ because he believed this was what God had called him to do.

## Implications and Actions

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We must remain faithful to the gospel of grace. Why? First, we must remain faithful to the gospel of grace, regardless of how much it is resisted, because legalists will continually oppose the free offer of grace. Too, we must remain faithful to the gospel of grace, regardless of how

### A QUESTION

Luke tells of a young ruler who asked Jesus how he could inherit eternal life. When Jesus referred to the Ten Commandments, the young ruler responded, “All these I have kept since I was a boy” (Luke 18:21). Based on our text for this lesson, how would you respond to this young ruler’s claim?

often it is distorted, because libertines will continually take advantage of the offer of grace to follow the passions of the flesh.

Resisting both legalism and libertinism and remaining faithful to the gospel of grace is also important because we are all doomed if we are counting on our own efforts to establish a right relationship with God. Our only hope is God's grace. Thank God, Paul persisted in his commitment to the gospel of grace. We must follow his example.

## QUESTIONS

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1. What charges did Paul's enemies direct toward him?

2. Why was Paul upset with the Galatian Christians?



6. Can you think of some issue in the life of the church about which we have been too tolerant?

## NOTES

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1. The New American Standard Bible translates Galatians 1:6a–7b, “for a different gospel, which is really not another.” “Different” in 1:6 is *heteron*, and “another” in 1:7 is *allos*.