

The Primacy of the Gospel (Session 1)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 July 2023

Preacher: Edward Sim

[0 : 00] Now, if you want to understand that, we need to know a bit about the background of Galatians.

Galatians is probably one of the earliest books that's written in the New Testament. If it's not the earliest, it's one of the earliest. The dating is probably about 50 AD, which is about 20 years after Jesus died and rose again.

And just one very interesting note, that the death and resurrection of Jesus, that sandwich, that grace and peace we see just now, was already in verse 1 to 4. So that actually put to death that idea, really, that Christians only made Jesus to be dead and rose again only as a myth, like many, many, many, many, many years later.

Many people have been alive then, and they will have known that Jesus is risen from the dead. But that's a sidetrack. So what's really the problem that's facing the Galatian church?

Well, we can find that actually in verse 7, right? Sorry, I think it's, yep, verse 7. It says that there are some who trouble you, and they want to distort the gospel of Christ.

[1 : 17] So what is that? That is that some people, probably from the outside, false teachers, they have come into the Galatian church, and what they are telling them, the Galatian church is this, you have believed in Jesus, that is good.

You have believed in Jesus, that is good. But you know what? That is not enough. You believe in Jesus, that's great, but that's not enough.

If you really want to be somebody, if you really want to be considered righteous, if you really want to consider someone worthy, not only must you believe in Jesus, you must also attend a home fellowship group.

No, no. I just want to see whether you are taking attention. You must also keep the Mosaic law, and in particular, the circumcision law.

And the Galatian church, for some reason, is opening up to this teaching. They want to add circumcision on top of believing Jesus in order to justify themselves.

[2 : 29] And so Paul is writing them to warn them that to do so is to distort the gospel, is to turn to another gospel. So that is the historical context of Galatians.

Right, if you are with me. But obviously a question that you'll be asking in your head right now is, what does that do with you and me? As I look around this room, I'm sure that nobody, none of us here, are tempted to add circumcision to the gospel of Jesus.

If you are, I would love to have a chat with you. But while we are none of us are doing so, one of us are doing so, we can actually be like the Galatians that we are tempted to add something else to the gospel of Christ.

And why is that the case? Why is that the case? So I'm going to suggest to you, so if you have your outline review, I'm following it now pretty much, that I'm going to suggest to you that the reason that we can be in the same state as Galatians is for two reasons.

The first reason is that we all, all of us sitting here, we all long for some kind of righteousness. And the second thing is that the kind of righteousness that you hold on to, that we hold on to, kind of informs our sense of danger and anxiety.

[3 : 58] Let me explain the first part. That we all, without any exception, every one of us here, we all long for some kind of righteousness. Now Martin Luther, who changed the history in Europe through Reformation 500 years ago, he loved the book of Galatians.

Do you know why he called it? It's compared to his wife. He said the episode to the Galatians is my episode to which I am wedded. He wants to get married to this book. That's how he likes it. It is my Catherine von Bora.

That's the name of his wife actually, by the way. And so in your outline, there's a quote there of how Luther is summarizing the message of the Galatians. Let me read that for you.

That Paul, this is the argument of Galatians, that Paul, what does he want to do? He wants to establish the doctrine of faith, grace, the forgiveness of sins, or Christian righteousness, so that we may have a perfect knowledge and know the difference between Christian righteousness and all other kinds of righteousness.

Now I will say that that's actually a very, very remarkable and astonishing insight by Luther from 500 years ago. That the book of Galatians is to help us what?

[5 : 11] distinguish between Christian righteousness and all other kinds of righteousness. Now, so in order to know this, we need to know what are these two, right?

So what is the Christian righteousness that Luther is actually referring to? Come with me to Galatians 2, chapter 2, 16.

In Galatians 2, 16, you have these words from Paul. And Paul says that we know, what do we know? We know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but through faith in Christ, in Jesus Christ.

So here Paul just used the word justify, which is very, very close to the word righteousness. Now, these are legal terms. We have some lawyers over here, so they should know what I'm talking about, I guess.

That when you are justified, right? Now, it's usually explained as if it's someone getting acquitted, someone getting out of jail. But I'll sum it to you, it's actually a little bit more than that. Yes, our sins are forgiven when you are justified, but to be justified really is to be seen as, considered as an upright member of the society.

[6 : 27] That is, he's not only just out of prison, he's considered as someone who has never been to prison before. That is what justify is like. And to be justified in Christ before God, it means nothing less than this, that we are seen by God as if we are in Jesus, or as if we are Jesus, even though we are not Jesus.

To be justified before God is to be seen by God as if we are His Son, even though internally and the way we live our lives may not be like His Son.

That is actually the righteousness of Christ has been imputed to us. And you see, if you look at 2.16, how do we actually get that justification? We don't get it through the works of the law. We get it through faith in Jesus Christ.

So not by any righteous deed that we have done in ourselves, not by any good deed of performance, but solely on the basis of faith in Christ Jesus.

So that is the Christian doctrine. I'm sure it's the same gospel that Brian preaches to you guys every week and week out, that Jesus has come, He has come and He's died, He rose for us, we trust in Him alone, and now we are considered justified before God.

[7 : 42] Okay, but here's the question again. What does all that have to do with you and me? Or to use the words of a certain leader of Singapore last time, can we eat this for breakfast?

So the next line in the quote of Martin Luther is going to help us in this respect. Because it's going to explain, he explains that the book of Galatians is to help us distinguish between Christian righteousness and what?

Other kinds of righteousness, right? For he continues to say, there's a righteousness of many kinds. There's a political righteousness, there's a ceremonial righteousness, righteousness, and the righteousness of the Mosaic Law.

Because what he's saying here is very important, guys. Listen up. Because he's saying that we are all righteous, hungry people.

And we find our righteousness or justification in one way or another. Let me explain this. You know there's a movie, I'm revealing my age a little bit here, that's from the 80s.

[8 : 51] There's a, from, I think it's acted by Sylvester Stallone. Rocky. Yeah. And there's a very famous scene, right? Where Rocky is contemplating that he's going to fight against this guy.

He's a boxer. And this guy, Apollo Creed, is someone that has, no one has ever been able to withstand this guy for even a single round. No one has gone to distance with this guy. And he's looking at this, he's facing now certain defeat.

He's contemplating that. And he's asked, why do you want to do this? And that's his answer. Do you know what his answer is? His answer is, no one, no one has ever gone the distance with Apollo Creed.

And I want to do that. I don't want to win. But if I can hear the bell at the end of the day and I can be still standing, and I've gone the distance, I can know, I can tell myself for the first time in my life that I'm not just another bum.

You hear that? I'm not just another bum. I'm not just another nobody. I'm somebody. If at the end of the day I can stand, I can go the distance, I can prove myself.

[9 : 55] And Rocky is doing that because he's hungry for a certain kind of justification. And I submit to you that driving our lives, many of us, is actually some kind of seeking of that.

That's the reason that for Christian parents, if my kids misbehave in church, I get particularly anxious, especially pastor's kids.

Why? Because I fear that people will say, hey, you're pastor, you don't know how to parent your own kids. You cannot get them in line. But why? I want to be justified by my parenting.

And that's the reason why you cannot say no to your boss when your boss asks you to do it over time. Because you need to keep that job.

You need to keep that job in order to justify yourselves. It's not only just about putting food on the table sometimes. And so the reality is that we all try to do this in one way or another.

[11 : 05] we can even use serving in church to teach and preach in church in order to justify ourselves and to proper ourselves. So we may not be guilty.

We may not be tempted. Obviously, there's a part I still don't quite understand why they will be open to circumcision. But, we are not guilty of adding circumcision to Christ, but we do so through the adding of achievement of career goals or the life goals of getting married or having children or being popular with friends in church.

And these are the things we look to to make ourselves say to ourselves that our life is worth something, that I am not just another bum. And, so we all seek for righteousness and we'll think about it, where you seek righteousness will immediately inform you of where you'll find your urgency and danger.

You see, if you really need to justify yourself through your career, right, career, then your greatest nightmare, right, is to lose your job, to be fired, or for some people to retire.

And that's why they cannot retire, they have to keep on working. Or even to so-called reach the peak of your career. And there's a reason why it's called a peak, right, it sounds nice.

[12 : 38] But once you reach the peak, we all know what, it's only going downhill from there. So, and if your sense of justification is not in these things, but actually in someone like, you know that you are only somebody, if someone loves you, and someone forms a family with you, then, naturally, being single is going to be the greatest nightmare of your life.

But you see, we don't have to subject ourselves to these things. Because if the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ is not just a theoretical thing, if it's true that we trust in this, that God of this universe, God who holds all things by the power of His word, to whom a billion years is like, just like a split second, and this universe, though it's so huge, can hardly fit into the palm of His hand.

And He said, you who trust in Jesus, you are fully accepted by Him. And He reckons you as if you are Jesus Himself. I don't want anything else that should give us a greater sense of security, that should give us a sense of boldness, that help us to say that really these nightmares are not true nightmares.

These are things I can go through and these things I can tahan. So, where are you finding your righteousness?

And where, where is, what is your greatest nightmare? Do you distinguish between the righteousness that we seek and the righteousness that we have in Christ?

[14 : 29] Do you see that we need to reject this one and to only find ourselves in the other? Because, you know, these are very different. We actually achieve the justification in Christ just by trusting in Him alone.

He has done all the work and all we need to do is to trust in Him and rely on Him. But for all the other kinds of justifications, whether it's your career, whether it's love or relationship or family, all these depends on our work and our maintenance.

So, if you are with me now, then we can begin to start to appreciate why Paul is writing in such a tone. He's astonished and he curses.

And what is informing his sense of danger is this, is that to lose our grip on justification by faith alone, right? Or to just acknowledge it in theory and allowing something else to have his grip on us is for Paul a terribly, terribly dangerous situation.

And so, in the rest of today's sermon, I would like to just continue to show you from the book of Galatians, right, how two sides of the same coin, which is ready to think about what are the dangers of turning away from the gospel.

[15 : 58] There's one side. And the flip side of that, obviously, would be the blessings of standing in the gospel. Let's turn back to Galatians chapter 1 verse 6.

Now, Paul here speaks here of Galatians turning to another gospel, right? And why? Why is it so bad to turn to another gospel? Paul says which is not turned to another, which is not a gospel at all, right?

But the reason why it's so bad is that it's actually turning away from God himself. You see, in verse 6, it says, you are so quickly deserting him, or in your version, the one who caught you in the grace of Christ.

So you see, the stakes are pretty high when you actually try to justify ourselves through any other means other than the grace of Jesus Christ itself.

Because whenever you add anything to this, you are actually, in fact, not just adding something, you are turning away from God himself. And the word there to use desert, right, is actually a verb that is used for actually soldiers missing at war, or in Singaporean terms, because they need to do national service, going AWOL, right?

[17 : 18] A-W-A-O-L. And that actually, in the army, is something that is punishable by martial law. It's a very terrible, serious offense. And so, because of the severity of this, that's why in verse 8 and 9, Paul says that even if another angel, or ourselves, or even Paul themselves, or any apostle, were to preach another gospel that's different from the one they have already received, let that person be accursed.

And they repeat it twice, again in verse 8. There are really only two ways, right? Which is, I think I'm just belaboring the point, which is either we build our righteousness on Christ himself, leading to blessedness, or we're going to build our justification on something else that leads to cursedness.

Now, if you're reading this closely, you will say, hey, Edward, Paul is not calling down curses on the Galatians themselves. He's calling down curses on those false teachers, right?

Because it says here that in verse 7, right, is anyone, verse 8, sorry, anyone who is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you receive, let him be accursed. But where does Paul get this basis to actually curse these false teachers?

I think we find it actually in chapter 3, verse 10, in the same book. Because in chapter 3, verse 10, this is what it says, for all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse.

[18 : 48] So, it's to preach another gospel, to entertain another gospel, right? It's to preach curse and to entertain cursedness.

And of course, to come under a curse themselves. The key word there in chapter 3, verse 10, is not the works of the law itself, but it's like those who rely on the works of the law to be justified.

And they become under a curse. So, anything that actually promises you justification that you're not a bum if you do this and that, right, apart from Jesus Christ alone, I will submit to you, is putting you in danger of cursing, of being under a curse.

Now, what are curses? In the Bible, curses only came in as a result of sin. They are not part of God's original creation.

If you read Genesis 1 and 2, Genesis 3, it's only when Adam and Eve sinned, right, curses came in. And what does God curse? God cursed the snake, God cursed the ground, He cursed work, He cursed labor, and of course, in the end, death.

[20 : 04] death comes upon mankind as a result. And then, that's the curse. And the curse is what? Actually, all our nightmares becoming true.

Whatever you seek to gain in your life, you will finally lose it. Now, I know there are some authors that wrote a book, This is Your Best Life Now.

I don't know why is that good news. Because if what I have now is my best life now, that's I'm cursed.

That's it. That's it. There's no hope. So how should I describe cursedness? How should we define it?

I tell you what, my summary of it is lost. It's a kind of lost. When God cursed creation, creation lost the original design intention of God.

[21 : 09] And that's why in this world that we live in right now, there's natural disasters, and that's why we have viruses, and we went through that, caused the whole world to come to stand still for three years.

work. And that is why work sometimes, even, I don't, I can speak for Brian, but I speak for myself, sometimes work, I'm talking about my own work right now, can sometimes be a chore, rather than pure productive joy.

You see, if you build your righteousness on anything else apart from Jesus, that depends on your own maintenance of it, your work, or whatever else, so to speak, okay, you're bound to fail.

You're bound to fail. Okay? I'm sorry to, if this offends you, but I'm observing aging. I know that some of you have come over and then say hi, and then you are surprised that I'm a speaker because they think I look too young.

But, actually, I'm reaching the half century mark soon, just give me a few more years time. Right? Okay? So, I'm not actually that young. My average is a stage where to lose half a pound even, right, requires about maybe, I don't know, 10 times the effort that I need to have 10 or 15 years ago.

[22 : 23] And what I'm talking about? Aging. Aging. What's aging? Aging is the process that we all come to terms with losing our functions in various speeds.

Some keep it very well, I'm sure, but nonetheless, it's still a losing of function. And in my observation, aging can sometimes be harder for those who used to have very, very sharp minds because they're aware that last time, it's easy for them to remember things.

But now, it's getting slower and slower to absorb things and it's frustrating. for those who used to be strong, the muscles who used to be strong are now getting ever that slightly weaker and harder to train.

Terrain that we used to cross, right? Without any issues, without even thinking twice. And now, I walk very carefully so that I do not fall down. And what is that? Why is that?

That is the reminder of our mortality, that's a reminder of death, that's a reminder that we live in a cursed world. And you see, what does have to do with this?

[23 : 30] Because if you build your righteousness on anything other than Jesus Christ, that is in this cursed world, whether it's ourselves, our cursed bodies, or anything that's made, you are doomed for failure.

That's why Paul says that you will be cursed. You're doomed to die. And of course, this curse is not just merely horizontal as if it's just what we experience here.

It's a sign of something deeper. It's a sign of something of true trouble, that we are separated from God Himself. Because things do not work as they should. Telling us this world is a cursed world, so cursedness tells something more than just losing things.

We are losing God Himself when we are cursed. And if you remain cursed, the ultimate end of that is to lose God entirely. Which means, actually, not to lose God entirely so that God is not going in picture, so to speak, but the God, you have God there and His holiness and His anger and none of His benevolence and His blessedness and that's what we will be living with forever and ever.

And that's the meaning of hell. now. Now, I'm sorry, if I say all that and make you feel very bad, I hope that you come with me to the next part, because the flip side is that while there's much cursedness in turning away from the gospel, there's much blessedness that we have that is standing in the gospel.

[24 : 54] So, come back with me to Galatians chapter 1. I know for sure the word blessing doesn't appear in the text that we're studying now.

Well, but this is not far from Paul's mind. Well, in chapter 3, we don't want to refer to that, he actually speaks about how those who are of faith, along with Abraham, are to be blessed together, who is the man of faith.

That is, Abraham, in chapter 3, is the man who is considered blessed. Why is he blessed? He's blessed because he trusted in God in Genesis chapter 15.

Right? And he was considered a righteous man. Listen to that. Justification by faith alone. And that's how God has been saving people from beginning to end in the whole of the whole Bible.

Abraham is not blessed because he has a lot of money. He's not blessed because he won some battles. He's blessed because how? He trusted in the promises of God himself. And so, the book of Galatians will tell us what some of these blessings that's now given to us while we are still waiting for some to be realized.

[26 : 03] So, when we come back to chapter 1, where do we find these sort of blessings? Actually, quite a few. But let me just come on this for a while now. That for us who trust in Jesus, what do we have?

We have God as our Father and we are deeply loved by Jesus. That is, if cursedness is the breaking down of our relationship with God first and the things around us, blessedness kind of reverses this order.

It first restores our relationship with God, right? We trust in Jesus. And only when Jesus comes back, then everything will work perfectly again, so to speak. So now, when we have our relationship restored with God, God is our Father and we are deeply loved by Jesus.

You see that from the beginning verses, the one we just read, verse 3, grace to you and peace from God our Father. Now how can Paul say that to them?

Is Paul just merely saying that because he's just saying something nice? It's just something nice to say at the beginning? No, Paul can say that because he trusted, he genuinely believed that the Galatian church have received the gospel.

[27 : 18] They have trusted in Jesus, but then they're now tempted to turn away from it. But Paul is now reminding them that there's great blessing that they're turning away from if they do so.

You see, if you think of justification by faith alone as merely how we are forgiven our sins, as how we are declared acquitted by the highest court in heaven, that's not wrong, but if that's the only thing we think about in terms of that, right, then it's still foreshort really what it brings us.

Because it's not only just getting out of jail free, it is what? to be received into a new family. It is to be rightly related to God himself.

And that's why this relationship with God is characterized by grace and peace. And peace. That's again verse 2. And grace, what does that mean?

That means that when we come to God, we no longer come on a basis of merits. We come on the basis of the merits of another. That is, we depend on Jesus, what he has done for us when we come into his presence.

[28 : 27] We can call God Abba Father, not because how well we have done, not because of our good deeds, not because we have done our quiet times this week, not because we have served in church, no, but because his son has served, because his son has done a good deed.

He's done the deed on the cross. And that's why by his blood, now we can come and call him Abba Father. And hence that provides true peace.

Now I know peace is the objective peace that we have in God when Jesus, through what Jesus did on the cross for us. But I think there's something about this peace that can be applied even to the ups and downs of life.

Because if this restored relationship with God, then now in Christ, God is my Father and he is now my true blessing and my true joy and my true treasure of my life.

And that's what the gospel offers all of us. Then you can understand, for example, how Jonathan Edwards is a pastor from the 18th century, just sharing something not theological but just a part of his life.

[29 : 37] At the end of his life, he served in a church for 22 years. He served in a huge church that's very famous, North Anthem, and then he was dismissed after 22 years. I hope that this will happen to any of us in this room.

But he's dismissed for what? Because he proposed, and he proposed rightly, I think, that communion should only be given to professing Christians who profess in Christ, who has properly professed faith.

But the church round him out. They said this is not good, this is going to bring disgrace to us, and they fired him. And this is how someone who wrote a diary then talked about how Jonathan Edwards received that news of being fired.

The faithful witness received the shock unshaken. I never saw the least symptoms of displeasure in his countenance the whole week, but he appeared like a man of God.

Now listen to this. Whose happiness was out of the reach of his enemies? Whose happiness is out of the reach of his enemies?

[30 : 50] Do you have a happiness that's out of the reach of your enemies that you know of? Because if you are building your justification on anything else, I can bet you that you are finding your happiness is something that's within reach of your enemies.

enemies. But in Christ Jesus, when we are justified by faith alone in him, this blessedness that comes with that, we have a peace, there's true peace that can bring us through the ups and downs of this world.

It's out of reach of his enemies, of our enemies for two reasons. First, it's by grace alone. It doesn't depend on us, but on God who freely gives.

And by second, if you truly grasp that doctrine, right, of what it means to be justified by faith alone, he's not defined by ministry successes or failures.

He's not justified by preaching well or preaching badly. And if you take this, if you come back to some of the examples we are talking about just now, and apply it to aging, aging can be a very scary process to many of us because it involves the losing of things.

[32 : 15] But if you trust in Jesus alone, you know, find that that justification is all you need, then I think that you, you know, some people when they retire, they just sink into depression.

And why? Because the only way they can find meaning in life and justify themselves is through their work. But some people, after they retire, right, maybe they find just pleasure, comfort, that kind of two camps, right?

but both are equally self-centered. I'll submit that if you are justified by Christ alone, and you really hone to that and apply that into aging and retirement, I think it looks like this.

You can come and tell young people in church that, hey, you don't need to really have that good job to be somebody. You don't really need that to be, because it comes from you, your words carry authority.

you can show them how it means that Christ is the true meaning of life. They can find your justification in Christ alone, and not in your performance or your achievements.

[33 : 28] You can really, really help the young people. And similarly, my friends, those who are younger, like me or younger, we can really be freed of many things if we really embrace this, justification by faith alone.

So in closing, I'd like to exhort you in a couple of things. Just want to remind you, because all of us here, we long for some kind of justification, right?

And we try to justify ourselves in one way or another. So I want to ask you, what is it that you say to yourself in the morning wake up that if I have this, then my life is worthy, then my life is justified, then I'm no longer just a bum.

Oops. Are you guys okay? Can you hear me? Okay? Sorry. And what is your greatest nightmare?

Because I think this passage teaches us that we need to identify such false voices in our lives. false teachers come to us as actual people who come and tell you a different gospel, who add to the gospel, but very often the work of the devil comes in much more subtle form, right?

[34 : 51] Newspaper, social media. So are you aware of that functional dichotomy in your life, that we believe in this, theoretically speaking, but in our actual life when we live it out, we are not satisfied with the gospel alone?

I'll put it this way, you believe in this, here in this camp, you believe it on Sunday, but when you go to work on Monday, all you can think about is how to get the approval of your boss or your colleagues.

So if you can't become aware of it, then the second thing is how do you respond to this? Are you able to identify with the tone of urgency and astonishment that Paul writes in Galatians 1?

Is this something that's dreadful enough to call down curses? Or are we just simply comfortable to live in this state where our heads believe in one thing, but our hearts and our bodies just live in totally another way?

That we have been approved by God, that's literally what it means, justified. In Christ Jesus, through grace alone, but we spend the rest of the week seeking the approval of man. Now, we do not only need to identify these false voices, not only do we need to resist them, that's what I'm trying to urge you to do.

[36 : 19] Let me close by just telling you how we can do so. I think the only way we can really, really come to heal this dichotomy in our lives is by just continually beholding and seeing the glory of Jesus again and again.

That's why Paul begins with those words. He reminded them of what Jesus has done for them in verse 1 to 8. Even though, sorry, verse 1 to 5.

Because even though Paul rises in a tone of urgency, he still reminds them of the gospel before he tells them he's astonished and they are cursed. Why? Because he wants them to see. What do they want to see?

He wants to see that Jesus has given himself for you and me. He stood in our place on the cross. He received punishment on our behalf. He has lost all things that's imaginable.

He suffered the curse on the cross. He lost popularity. He lost wealth. His own family did not understand him. And that's why he's cursed on the tree. Losing even God because he bore the wrath of God on our behalf.

[37 : 29] And so my friends, how are we not a bum? How are we just not another bum or just not somebody? We cannot do so through our performance or achievements.

That's the false gospel. But we are worthy because Jesus himself loved us and gave himself for us. So would you choose to stand in this gospel or would you turn away from it?

Can we close our eyes in prayer? Lord Jesus, we come before you and Lord, we come before you like the man who said to you, I believe but help me in my unbelief.

Lord, we want to really trust in you fully for the work you have done on the cross for our sake. That you have become cursed for us so that we may receive the blessing.

And yet how often our hearts stray, how our hearts long to prop ourselves through other means instead of finding our security in you and you alone. Lord Jesus, I ask, I want you by our spirit to really come and help our hearts to be truly open unto you and show us the different ways we stray from you.

[39 : 09] And yet you as a good shepherd call us back to your foe because you are the good shepherd who laid down your life for us. I ask this in your own precious name.

Amen.