

JESUS AND THE GOSPEL OF GRACE

Galatians 1:11-24

Does the preaching in our churches give too much prominence to Paul? A friend of mine who pastors a rather strategic church in East Texas had occasion to visit a number of churches and listen to a good bit of preaching a few years ago. It happened because he was prohibited from preaching by his doctors as he recovered from a heart attack. One of his observations was that he heard more about Paul than he did about Jesus. It became a matter of real concern to him.

One explanation for this is that Paul was humanly responsible for so much of our New Testament. And furthermore, so much of that which he wrote is autobiographical. The Galatian letter is a good example of this. This little letter has been divided into six chapters of about equal length. Two of these six chapters are autobiographical in nature. Our text for today is a part of this autobiographical section that opens this letter. Beginning with verse eleven and stretching to the last verse of chapter two we have an autobiographical section in which Paul defends his authority as an apostle. In the section found in this first chapter he does it by reminding his readers that he was an apostle before he ever went up to Jerusalem or met another Christian leader. His apostleship was independent of all human and religious authorities.

For us though this passage has more interest than just aiding us to understand this early Christian leader. Woven into his personal experiences are some things that give us needed insight into the very nature of the Christian gospel. Since the Gospel is at the heart of our Christian faith, this is most helpful. There are two such truths in this passage that help us see that it is the relationship that Jesus Christ has to the Gospel that is important --- not Paul, Paul is related to the Gospel just like us and should not be singled out for any special place. All of the honor is to go to Jesus Christ our Lord.

I. JESUS CHRIST IS THE SOURCE OF THE GOSPEL OF GRACE.

Where did the Gospel of grace originate? Paul wants to deny that it is human in origin and affirm that it came directly from Jesus Christ Himself.

"But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man." To certify means to make something known that is wondrous and remarkable. The thing we need to know is that the Gospel is not "according to man." This means that it is not human in its character, in its source, or its standard. The Gospel is not something put together by a religious genius. "For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it." It did not come to Paul like some tradition being passed down from generation to generation. Paul did not learn it from the apostles, or any religious hierarchy. Rather, "By the revelation of Jesus Christ."

A revelation is an unveiling, an unfolding, a making known of something or someone. The thing revealed in this case was the good news of the salvation by grace through faith plus nothing. The One responsible for this being made known to Paul was Jesus Christ Himself. He was the One doing the revealing. This removes all other sources from the scene --- whether they be natural or supernatural.

When did this revelation take place? From what follows in the passage, it would support the view that this revelation took place at the moment of Paul's life transforming encounter with Jesus Christ on the Damascus Road. In that encounter, not only did Paul see the risen Christ revealed before him, in the same moment he was made to see that Jesus was also the only way of salvation. He received from Christ a clear understanding of the way of salvation --- which is the good news. That this whole thing had to be at the initiative of Jesus Christ is made clear by a consideration of Paul's past.

Paul shares with us a bit of his past. It suggests nothing that could explain him coming up with a Gospel of grace. When you consider who he was, you will have to admit that Jesus Christ must have given the message. "For ye have heard of my conversation (manner of life) in times past in the Jewish religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it." No one was more intense in seeking to devastate the church and stop the spread of the good news than was Paul. "And profited in the Jew's religion above many my equals in mine own nation." Paul was fast moving toward the top as a religious leader among the Jews. He was passing up most of his peers just by his dedication and zeal. "Being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers." His commitment was to the maintenance of the faith of his fathers. There was nothing in the traditions that would explain Paul coming up with a message that declared that God would justify ungodly men on the basis of their faith in Jesus Christ as their Saviour.

What we have then in the gospel is not Pauline theology, or an early Christian interpretation of the Christ event, but rather a revelation which Jesus Christ himself personally delivered to Saul of Tarsus. It is a matter of divine revelation. This surely speaks to its trustworthiness and authority. Surely whatever was given to us personally by the Lord Jesus Christ can be trusted and followed.

Do you see the point of the Apostle? If the teachers who had come to Galatia did not like the Gospel Paul was preaching they did not like something that Jesus Christ Himself had given. Their argument was not with Paul but with the risen Lord Himself. This surely adds a new note of seriousness to the whole situation, and makes reasonable the strong reaction Paul was having to the message of these who would change the Gospel.

II. JESUS CHRIST IS THE SUBSTANCE OF THE GOSPEL.

The Gospel is more than just a plan which Jesus Christ personally delivered to his Apostle to be shared with the heathen world. He Himself is the heart of the plan. The Gospel has more to do with a person than it does with a plan. This becomes obvious when we look carefully at the things which are set forth in this paragraph.

Our first notice of this could be in the expression in verse eleven. "But by the revelation of Jesus Christ." Some understand Jesus Christ to be the One revealed rather than the agent of the revelation in that statement. Grammatically they are standing on solid ground, for it can point to him as either the source or the subject in this statement. However since the Gospel has already been suggested as the subject, it may be better to understand Him as the source here --- though in actuality He is both.

What is intimated in that first statement is made clear in the later statement. "But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace"---this call includes both salvation and service. The two cannot be separated in the experience of Foul. This is surely a clear statement about the divine initiative in the whole process. God is responsible for Paul being a Christian and for Paul being an Apostle. However the purpose in the call was---"to reveal his Son in me." This must refer to an inner revelation in the spirit of Paul. As he was confronted with the objective revelation of the risen Christ which was so glorious that it blinded him, he responded in submission and faith. This resulted in an inner spiritual revelation to Foul. God did not make known to Foul a plan --- but a Person. Paul was not saved by a plan --- but by a Person. Jesus Christ is the Saving Plan. God did not unveil to Foul four spiritual laws --- but a Risen Saviour. We must never forget the centrality of the Person of Christ in our message.

This inner revelation to Paul had a goal in view. "That I might preach Him among the heathen." Did you notice the substance of His proclamation? He did not go forth preaching some new discovery, some seven steps to eternal life, but rather a mighty Person, Jesus the Saviour of the world. That this was always the understanding of Foul becomes clear as you read his letters. In his first letter to the Corinthians he reminded them that when he first visited their city, he came to know nothing among them save "Jesus Christ and Him crucified". K Cor. 2:2) Paul's Gospel was a Person. A similar word is written to the people of Colosse. "To whom God would make known what is the riches of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory: whom we preach, warning every man." (Col. 1:27, 28) "Whom we preach". Jesus Christ Himself is the substance of the Gospel. To preach the Gospel is to preach Christ.

Applications:

These two insights into the nature of the Gospel have such important implications for us. They bring before us first something of the glory of the Gospel. The Gospel is something that Jesus Christ himself gave to us. It is His creation. An interesting fact comes before us as you consider this section. Jesus Christ shared this Gospel with the Apostles centered in Jerusalem in one way, and with Saul of Tarsus in another way. They were two distinct revelations of the Gospel. But interestingly they both tell the same story. In the revelation that He delivered to the first twelve, the emphasis upon His person was clear. To them He announced, "I am the Way". The revelation that He gave to Paul bore the same marks. In it Jesus is the only way of salvation. We must never forget then that what we have is the glorious revelation given to us by Christ Jesus personally.

Another important application here is that the preaching of the Gospel must involve a declaration of Jesus Christ. We are to preach Christ. Many pulpits across the land have a verse of scripture inscribed on them. They have the verse from the Gospel of John that records the request of the Greeks, "Sirs, we would see Jesus." Preaching that does not present Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation is not Gospel preaching. Apart from Him we have no Gospel.

And lastly, those who preach the Gospel must have experienced the power of the Gospel. This is the first preparation in the life of the witness. Becoming a witness does not begin with the learning of techniques or plans or approaches or arguments. Rather it begins with a personal, life-transforming encounter with Jesus Christ. One of my dear friends became a pastor before he ever experienced the Gospel. Trying to tell others about something he had never experienced personally drove him to agnosticism and away from the church. Thankfully some time later he had a life transforming encounter with Jesus Christ which prepared him to share the Gospel with others. Paul's first word did not deal with theory, but with a testimony. The sharing of the Gospel that is effective must always have in it an element of the testimonial. It must be a word rooted in a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ. There is a special note of authority in this kind of Gospel sharing.

Are you convinced with me that we have something worth sharing with this community and our world? Once he had come to understand Who he had met on the Damascus Road, Paul felt himself under a special obligation to make sure that every man, Jew or Gentile, had a personal opportunity to know Jesus Christ as His personal Saviour. Oh that we would feel that kind of urgency about sharing the good news that Christ has given to us, even the good news of which He is the main theme.