

The Wickedness of Gospel Distorters

Scripture: Galatians 5:7–12

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Well, let's turn to the fifth chapter of the book of Galatians again; and these messages in this opening part of the fifth chapter are somewhat difficult to preach, and very infrequently will you ever hear them preached, because they are such severe denunciations of false doctrine and false teachers.

The opening twelve verses are designed to make it crystal clear how the apostle Paul and God Himself feels about false doctrine and false teachers. Now I'm not talking about other religions. I'm not talking about some form of paganism or false religion – Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, or whatever else – the issue here has to do with an aberrant form of Christianity, which is no different than a pagan religion, as we will dramatically see in this passage. And what Paul is attacking in this entire letter is the idea that you can tamper with the gospel of salvation.

The gospel of salvation says that men and women are saved from sin and death and hell by faith in Christ alone, apart from any works or ceremonies or rituals or ordinances of any kind. That is the gospel. Salvation is by faith alone, and all glory goes to God. It results in a transformed life, which then produces righteous works. But there are no righteous works or religious works that contribute anything to salvation. That is the message of Galatians. And as I have been telling you, it is the first of Paul's letters, and attacks the most critical issue in his ministry, and that is the reality of the gospel.

He had gone to the region of Galatia and he had preached the gospel in a number of cities and in many of those cities churches began. They were flourishing churches. The gospel was preached that people believed. Their lives were transformed. They were justified by God, their sins were forgiven, they were given the Holy Spirit, and they begun to see the Spirit of God operating in their lives – flourishing churches. All was going well, wonderfully converted out of paganism redeemed, given new life in Christ, receiving the Holy Spirit, beginning to see the evidences of the Holy Spirit conforming them to Christlikeness – that is the work of sanctification.

They were flourishing, until some Jewish teachers showed up, the same kind of Jewish teachers that basically followed Paul everywhere, to undermine the gospel. They were emissaries of Satan. They were false apostles. They were like Satan disguised as ministers of light, but they were ministers of darkness who represented Satan and the kingdom of darkness. It wasn't that they had an anti-Christian message, it was they had a deviant, quasi-Christian message; and that's what made them so deceptive. These were Jews from Jerusalem who said they believed in Jesus Christ, and they commended surely the Galatians for also believing in Jesus Christ.

But they also said to them, "You cannot be saved by believing in Christ alone; that's not sufficient to save you. You must follow the rules and ordinances and ceremonies and external rituals associated with the law of Moses; and that means you must affirm circumcision and all the Mosaic ordinances,

as if to say you can't just come from paganism into the kingdom of God, you have to go through Judaism, and you have to maintain some of those standards of Judaism revealed in the Old Testament.

Paul saw this as a different gospel. And you will remember that in chapter 1 he showed his righteous anger over this. Chapter 1, verse 6, "I am amazed that you're so quickly deserting Him who called you," – that would be God Himself – "Him who called you by the grace of Christ for a different gospel; which is really not another;" – it's not good news, it's not another gospel, there is no other gospel – "only there are some" – namely these Jews from Jerusalem – "who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ."

Again, this is the issue here. It's not an anti-Christian religion they taught. It's not even Judaism itself that they taught. It is a distorted form of Christianity that says salvation comes by faith in Christ plus your works. It's the combination. It's the hybrid that brings salvation.

Paul says, "Even if we," – as an apostle – "or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed," *anathema*, damned. "As we've said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed," damned by God Himself.

Paul is writing Galatians in a state of righteous anger, the kind of righteous anger that I think is missing from much preaching today. And while we certainly do preach all that the Scripture declares, and that means the love and compassion of God, there is a place for righteous anger over the false doctrines that have found their way into Christianity and seduced people as they were attempting to seduce the Galatians.

Now in the opening of the fifth chapter Paul confronts these false teachers. In the first six verses we looked at last time he confronts their false doctrine, helps us to understand what it does, and then from verse 7 to 12 he looks at the character of false teachers, the very work that marks them. Now remember in the big picture, this whole letter is defending the gospel of salvation by faith alone. And the first two chapters he defended it by his own apostolic testimony. And then in chapters 3 and 4 he defended it from Old Testament Scripture, because it was always the way of salvation – by faith alone. And now in chapters 5 and 6 he defends the true gospel by the experience of the believers in Galatia and the work of the Holy Spirit which they had always seen manifest in their life.

So we're in that section. But before he starts to talk about the work of the Spirit in their life, which is a manifestation that they have genuinely been saved by faith, he lays down an all out assault on false doctrine and false teachers. There is not a worse position for any human being to be in than to be a false teacher propagating lies from hell, lies that twist Scripture to pervert the true gospel, which then clouds the reality of the only way of salvation. So that's what's on his mind in these opening twelve verses.

Last week we looked at the first six and we saw what happens to someone who accepts this doctrine of salvation by faith and works. And what did we learn? "If you do that, Christ is of no benefit to you," verse 2. "If you do that, you're under obligation to keep the whole law," verse 3. "If you do that, you have been severed from Christ. If you do that, you have fallen from grace." And then in verse 5, "If you do that, you will never know the righteousness that you pursue."

False doctrine leads you down the wrong path. It makes Christ useless. It makes you obligated to the law, cuts you off from the only Savior. You step out of the category of grace, which is the only category, the only realm of salvation, and you have no hope of the righteousness you pursue. Stay away from false doctrine, it is damning. Paul elsewhere calls such things damnable heresies. And remember as he said at the beginning of verse 1, “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm, do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.”

Any kind of works system ends up being a yoke of slavery, which does you no good. It does you no good. This freedom is not freedom to sin, it is freedom to do right, to do good. This freedom is tied to a new life principle, eternal life from God; a new power, the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. “You are now free from external constraints which you could not keep up, because now you have an internal power in the Holy Spirit. All the law did was put rules on the outside which you couldn’t keep. Grace puts the Holy Spirit on the inside and gives you the power and the freedom to do what is right, which is what you desire to do because you have been recreated. Stand firm,” he’s saying this to Gentiles. “Don’t go back to a Judaism you never knew.”

They hadn’t had any experience with Judaism. They didn’t live under the Mosaic law. There was no reason for them to go back to something that was never a part of their lives. The Jews wanted them to do that because they wanted to be the only door into the kingdom of God. But that was long gone. Now in Christ there’s neither Jew nor Gentile. The way is the way of faith and the way of grace.

So Paul, first of all, then in this chapter goes after the false doctrine, and we saw that in verses 2 through 6. Now let’s come to verse 7, and I want you to understand this portion and the gravity of it as we go. And I’m going to keep reminding you, we’re talking here not about an agnostic, not about an atheist, not about a blatant God-hater, not about a Christ-hater and a Christ-denier, not about some religion that attacks Christianity, we’re talking about people who declare that they are the people of the true God, that they acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Savior, but they add works to faith. Such forms of Christianity abound.

In fact, one could argue that a hybrid kind of salvation, faith and works is defining the largest number of so called Christians in the world, because it would encompass both Eastern Orthodoxy and the Roman Catholic system, and all kinds of other hybrid forms of Christianity. This is not a small group, this is a massive population of deceived people. Paul wants us to understand the seriousness of this, so he’s going to tell us about false teachers. Let me read verses 7 to 12.

“You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion did not come from Him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough. I have confidence in you in the Lord that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you will bear his judgment whoever he is. But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished. I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves.”

I don’t know that there’s a stronger statement against false teachers than this. Jude has strong statements, and we’ll look at them. Second Peter has strong statements. But of all of Paul’s writings, this is the most devastating assault on false forms of Christianity – those who say they believe in the true God, even the Word of God, the Christ of God, but add works to salvation. He shows the evil of

their works in several statements.

Number one, verse 7: “You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth?” False teachers hinder you from the truth. False teachers hinder from the truth. Paul liked to use the metaphor of a race, very popular form of activity in the ancient world. “You were running well,” he says, using the metaphor of the race. He used it back in chapter 2, verse 2 when he talked about himself running. This was a very common metaphor, moving rapidly ahead. He is saying, “You started out so well.”

Back in chapter 3, verse 3, “You begun in the Spirit. You’re moving so well. You were running well.” Collectively he’s looking at the church and seeing everything seemed to be going in the right direction. But again it’s “you,” it’s not “we.”

“We through the Spirit” – in verse 5 – “embraces only believers.” But here it’s “you,” and that means it’s the people in the congregation, some of whom were listening to these Judaizing teachers and being seduced into adherence to that. We know that, because back in chapter 4, verse 10, he says, “You observe days and months and season and years, and I fear that perhaps I’ve labored over you in vain. You seem to have already stepped into some of these forms of external Judaism. But you were running well. Who hindered you?” Not asking for a name or names, it’s a rhetorical question. “You’ve got to understand who it is that is hindering you.”

They’re passing themselves off as scholars of the Old Testament. They were very likely connected to the Pharisees. They are the kind of people who would let you think that they came from Jerusalem, that they have the authority of James, who was the leader of the Jerusalem church, that they bear some apostolic weight. “They have a credential or so to impress you. But let’s be honest; who are they really who hinder you? Who are they?”

In the larger scheme of things today they may be religious leaders. They may wear robes. They may be priests, they may be patriarchs, they may be popes or cardinals or bishops, they may be pastors, they may be whatever. They may have titles, education. But who are they really?

These Judaizers had stepped into the race that the Galatians were running well and put up obstacles. They had put a blockage in the pathway, and they had caused these people – some, no doubt, even believers – wondering about this, and certainly those that were on the edge of faith thinking maybe this is the right way to go, and they would have turned their backs on faith and walked right into legalism and right into destruction.

They certainly attacked Paul’s apostolic authority, they must have attacked the truth of the Old Testament, and they certainly had to attack the Holy Spirit’s power. So they were attacking all the categories of evidence that Paul uses in this book. They were throwing legalism at these people, and it was interrupting the race and making the runners hesitant and confused. And their confusion led Paul to be perplexed, back in chapter 4, verse 20. Paul doesn’t want an answer from them except to listen to him, and he will answer the rhetorical question himself: “Who is it that hinders you from obeying the truth?”

Now what does it mean to obey the truth? That is a key interpretive phrase in this section. To obey the truth essentially in the New Testament means “to believe the gospel.” It means “to believe the

gospel.”

I don't know if you've thought of it this way, but the gospel is a command. It is not a suggestion, it is not God sharing with you, it is God commanding you. I think we even as believers, when we go out to present the gospel would do well not to talk about sharing the gospel, but talk about commanding people to believe, because that's what the gospel does: it calls for obedience.

In the sixth chapter of Acts we see an illustration of this: “The word of God kept spreading; the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem. A great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.” An act of confessing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is an act of obedience to the gospel, which is a command, which is a command.

In Romans chapter 2 this kind of language continues – just a few illustrations of it. Romans chapter 2 talks about those who are ungodly as “selfishly ambitious” – verse 8 – “and they do not obey the truth. They do not obey the truth, but rather obey unrighteousness. For them is coming wrath from God and indignation.”

In the sixth chapter of Romans, verse 17, Paul says, “Thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed. You actually became slaves of righteousness.” It is a call again to obedience and a call to slavery. You are called to be a slave of Christ and a slave of righteousness.

As Paul comes to the end of Romans, in the fifteenth chapter and the eighteenth verse we see this kind of language again: “I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles, obedience to the gospel command.”

At the end of Romans chapter 16, verse 26 say, “Now the gospel, the preaching of Christ, the mystery of the revelation of Christ is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God.” There's the word “commandment.” “The gospel is a commandment of the eternal God, made known to all nations, leading to obedience of faith.” The gospel is a command.

And then we find on the other side, 2 Thessalonians 1:8, that, “God will send the Lord Jesus from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire,” – 2 Thessalonians 1:8 – “dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and the glory of His power,” destruction on those who do not obey the gospel. It is the obedience of faith. It is the obedience to the truth. It is the obedience to the gospel. Trusting in Christ is a command, it is a command.

In 2 Corinthians 10 it says essentially that when we come to preach the gospel to those that are held captive by Satan the goal is to set them free from all that and bring every thought captive to Christ, every thought captive to Christ. We are calling people to obedience. Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:22, “Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls.” The gospel is not an option, it is a command. And when it is rejected, judgment, everlasting judgment falls.

Some of these Galatians were, no doubt, on the brink of coming in full faith to Christ, but like those in the book of Hebrews were hesitant for whatever reason. And now these legalists had come along, and for their own reasons were wanting to push them into legalism and away from the gospel. And you might wonder why would they ever do such a thing; and the answer's given you in chapter 6 of this letter, verse 12: "They desire to make a good showing in the flesh, and so they try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ."

They didn't want the persecution that came on them when they said they believed in the cross of Christ. This is a critical point. They had believed in the cross of Christ, but they were not going to exclude their Judaistic works, because it was enough to bear the stigma of believing in a crucified Messiah without being accused of the Jews of abandoning your Judaism. If they did that, they would have been persecuted. It's as if to say, the Jews could tolerate them believing in Jesus as the Messiah, even though it was a stumbling block to them if they continued to adhere to the law of Moses. So they were trying to hold on to their Jewish community by making this good showing in the flesh in addition to saying they believed in the cross.

Then verse 13, "Those who are circumcised do not even keep the law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh." They want to be able to say to their Jewish community, "No, no, no, we're supportive of Judaism. No, no, this Christianity is just a branch of Judaism, and we still believe, you know, the law. The law has a place, it has the priority place." They wanted to hold onto that for their own personal social benefit.

Paul says, "That's a false gospel. If you go that way Christ is no benefit to you. You're under the law to keep the whole law perfectly if you think you're saved by the law. You are severed from Christ, you are fallen from grace, and you will never attain the righteousness you pursue." False teachers hinder the truth, they get in the way of the truth.

Maybe this should be a moment to look at 2 Peter chapter 2, verse 1: "False prophets arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you." Keep in mind, this is where they go: "They infiltrate, they introduce destructive heresies. They do it for greed. They exploit you with false words;" - verse 3 - "and God has set them for judgment."

So, first of all, from what we see here in Galatians 5, the work of false teachers is to hinder the truth, to hinder the truth. If you do that, you have taken up the cause of the archetypal, arch-liar Satan himself. This is Satan's work, even though it has Christianity as a label.

Secondly - back to Galatians 5. False teachers hinder the truth; secondly, they do not represent God, they do not come from God. They may say they do; they will say they do. They will claim divine rights, divine authority, divine power. They may even say they speak for God. They speak as if the mouthpiece of God. But notice verse 8: "This persuasion did not come from Him who calls you." This is an effectual call, the call of God to salvation, the God who called you into salvation.

By the way, whenever you see anything about God calling in the Epistles of the New Testament it's always the effectual, saving call, not just an open gospel call. It's the call to salvation mentioned in Romans chapter 8, that whom He called He justified. It's the call that awakens the dead sinner and regenerates him and gives him life. It's that call. "The God who called you and gave you life is not the one who sent these teachers with this persuasion."

These legalistic lies are not from God. It is impossible to deviate from the true gospel and come from God, because God has pronounced *anathema* on any such deviation. There's no connection to God, no connection. I know you think about people in these forms of Christianity and you think, "Well, they must be connected to God. They pray to God, they talk about God, they even hang around sometimes with leaders who are true believers and true ministers of the gospel, and they get together for political and social reasons and all of that, and they seem to be mutually committed together."

Recently there was a prayer breakfast, a presidential prayer breakfast, which was a meeting together of apostate heretics under the curse of God, and true believers and children of God; and we look at that and we say, "But they all talk about the same God, and they even talk about Jesus." And it's not wrong for people to get together for some noble, philanthropic cause for some benefit to mankind – we applaud all of that. But there seems to be a lot of confusion about who these people really are as the emissaries of hell. "You're not hearing from God when you hear from them, you're not."

This message is not preached today. This would literally disintegrate a lot of alliances that shouldn't exist in the first place. So false teachers hinder the truth and they do not come from God.

Thirdly, they contaminate the church, they contaminate the church. This is tragic, verse 9: "A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough." We all know what yeast is, right? And yeast is a picture in Scripture of permeation. It's usually used of evil influence, permeating evil influence.

The Jews before the days of unleavened bread would remove every particle of leaven from their homes. Part of that feast was to recognize that they needed to get rid of the permeating influence of sin, and so this was a symbol of that. Leaven operated on the principle of fermentation, as you know, so it was a good illustration of moral and spiritual corruption. These false teachers contaminate the church, they corrupt the church.

By the way, this is a common proverb, verse 8, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough." Paul used it in 1 Corinthians 5:6. It's the same thing: "A little leaven leavens the whole lump," and he's talking about again the influence of sin and the influence of evil and the evil of false doctrine in the church.

But it all really kind of began in the New Testament with the words of our Lord in Matthew 16; and again he was talking about the most religious Jewish people – the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Matthew 16:6, Jesus said, "Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, of the leaven." What did He mean by that? Well, down in verse 12, "They understood that He didn't say to beware of the leaven of bread," – not the bread itself – "but the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

So it was our Lord who used the idea of leaven as a permeating evil influence, referring to the teaching of the Pharisees who were the most fastidious, legalistic Jews. And here the apostle Paul picks it up, as he does in 1 Corinthians 5. It's similar to Paul's words in 2 Timothy chapter 2, verse 17, where he says that the teaching of false doctrine eats like gangrene. It's that same kind of corrupting, permeating influence. I suppose in the modern world where we now have a more comprehensive understanding of the pathology of disease, the Lord might have used, if He were

saying it today, the cancer of the Pharisees and the cancer of the Sadducees – a symbol of invisible, permeating corruption.

But our Lord wants these people to know, so through the apostle Paul He tells them, “These false teachers will contaminate the church. They will corrupt the church.” We see it all the time. We see so many quote-unquote “evangelical people” embracing these people as if they are part of the kingdom of God when they are the kingdom of darkness, and they pull in their permeating, corrupting evil influence.

Just to show you a little more of that, Jude chapter – only one chapter, verse 11 of chapter 1: “Woe to them!” These are the false teachers. “Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain. They have rushed into the error of Balaam for pay. They perish in the rebellion of Korah.”

And then he describes them: “They are the men who are hidden reefs in your love feasts; they feast with you without fear. This is what they do: they get inside the church and they feast with you, and they’re part of your love feasts.” They want to be there for the occasions that give them credibility. The fact is, “They are clouds without water, carried along by winds; they are autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up their own shame like foam; wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever.”

“And on them” – verse 15 says – “will judgment fall, to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him.” Four times they’re called “ungodly” in one verse. These people do not come from God, they permeate and contaminate the church.

Paul comes to a fourth characteristic in verse 10: “I have confidence in you in the Lord that you will adopt no other view. But the one who is disturbing you; but the one who is disturbing you will bear his judgment, whoever he is.” They will face divine judgment.

We saw that, as I just read, in Jude, and also in 2 Peter chapter 2. They will face judgment. Paul is saying, “I have confidence in you in the Lord, that you will adopt no other view. I have confidence that you’re going to go the right way, that you’re going to be faithful to the gospel of grace. My confidence isn’t in me, it’s in the Lord, that the Lord is going to lead you into the truth. I have confidence that the Lord is going to bring you to the truth, and that you will adopt no other view.

“But the one who is disturbing you will bear his judgement, whoever he is. I don’t care who he is, I don’t care what credentials he has, I don’t care what religious claims he makes,” – Paul says – “I have come to the settled conclusion in the Lord that you’re going to come to the truth and be faithful to the truth. But with regard to the false teachers, they will bear judgment from God. Doesn’t matter who they are. Doesn’t matter who they are.” It’s as if he’s saying, “I’m confident that you’re going to be okay, because the Lord is going to lead you to a full commitment to the gospel.

“But the false teachers who are disturbing you” – that word means “throwing you into confusion” – “they’re going to face horrendous punishment, horrendous punishment.” When someone gets inside a church and tampers with the church the punishment is severe. When someone says they’re a believer, a true believer, and they introduce their error and their corruption to the church, the Lord is very serious in His response.

You see this in two letters in Revelation 2, two letters to two churches. The first to the church at Pergamum says in verse 13 of Revelation 2, “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is;” – city of Pergamum – “you hold fast My name, didn’t deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam.” The teaching of Balaam mentioned here and also earlier, as we saw, is being in the religious business for money, which is what false teachers do.

“There are those” – in the church at Pergamum – “who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, commit acts of immorality. You also have some in the same way who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.” This is another false doctrine system; it had gone into the church at Pergamum.

Now verse 16 says, “Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.” He will make war against false teachers in the church.

In the next letter to Thyatira it’s very much same, verse 19: “I know your deeds, your love, faith, service, all of that. But I have this against you,” – verse 20 – “you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols.” This means that even believers were captive to this corruption, at least for a time.

“I gave her time to repent, she doesn’t want to repent of her immorality. I’ll throw her on a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds. And I will kill her children with pestilence, and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts.” The Lord looks at His church and He sees false doctrine and false teachers, and He takes serious action.

So what is the impact of false teachers? They hinder the truth, they do not come from God, they contaminate the church, and they end in a face-to-face judgment with God.

Then Paul has one other thing to say in verse 11: They also persecute the true teachers. They also persecute the true teachers. “But I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished.” Now let me give you the background of this verse so you’ll understand it.

Paul was persecuted. He once persecuted the church. After his conversion he was persecuted, and the primary source of persecution of Paul came from the Jews. Yes, the Gentiles also persecuted him, but particularly the Jews persecuted Paul. They dogged his steps. The Judaizers doing what they were doing was a form of anti-Paul effort. It was a kind of persecution. They didn’t have the authority to inflict wounds on his body or make him a captive; they wouldn’t be able to do that unless he was back in Jerusalem in their country. But they were persecuting him by dogging his steps with false doctrine, trying to undermine everything he did.

But notice what he says there: “Brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted?” Somebody must have said, “Well, Paul, wait a minute. You’re inconsistent, you preach circumcision.”

What in the world would they have in mind with that? Very simple. Back in the sixteenth chapter of the book of Acts – you don't have to go to it, I'll just tell you about it – Paul came to meet a young man by the name of Timothy. Paul met Timothy, was impressed by Timothy's righteous life, godliness; he was a believer in Christ. His father was a Gentile, but his mother was Jewish. Timothy had never been circumcised, but he was a believer in Christ.

Paul had him circumcised. Somebody probably told the Judaizers about that and said, "Look, you even preach circumcision." And Paul is saying, "If you think I preach circumcision, why are you persecuting me, if that's what you want and you think I'm doing it?" Well, of course they didn't think that. They persecuted him because he didn't preach it.

But then that brings up the issue of Timothy. Why did he do that? Very simple reason. Timothy was already a believer; it had nothing to do with salvation. But he would have had no access to synagogues. It would have been the natural thought of Jews that he had a Gentile father and he had a Jewish mother. Since he wasn't circumcised, he must be a pagan, he must have taken his father's religion. This would have made it difficult for Timothy to minister along with Paul. So Paul accommodates the Jewish expectation by having Timothy go through this surgery so that he will be accepted as one who has embraced Judaism like Paul, and together they can minister to the Jews. It was nothing more than that.

And it was obvious he didn't preach that or do it any other time, or they wouldn't persecute him for not preaching it. "If I preached circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished." He's saying this: "If I was preaching circumcision the Jews wouldn't be stumbling over the cross."

Now you have to understand what he means by that. The Jews had two problems with apostolic preaching. Problem number one was a crucified Messiah. That was a problem. That was a stumbling block to them, because they thought Messiah was going to come be a king, not a crucified victim of pagans, Romans. That was a problem.

But there was an even greater problem, and that was that Paul was saying, "We had no obligation as believers to adhere to the Mosaic ordinances." That was a bigger problem. Those Judaizers knew it, because I told you, in chapter 6, the Judaizers believed in Christ and the cross, but they also wanted to embrace the whole Mosaic ritual so that their friends would accept them.

Paul would have been accepted if he had believed in a crucified Messiah, Jesus Christ, but held onto the trappings of Judaism if his message had been, "You have to believe in Jesus Christ crucified and adhere to the Mosaic law, and then you will be saved." But Paul didn't preach circumcision, he didn't preach Mosaic law, and that's why they were after him with such vicious passion.

A good way to understand this is to remember the story of Stephen. In the sixth chapter of Acts – and I'll just remind you of it – the Sanhedrin put Stephen on trial: Jewish Sanhedrin, Jerusalem. The charge was not that he was worshiping the crucified One, that was not the charge. The charge was this: he is blaspheming the Jewish temple and the law of Moses, Acts 6:13 and 14.

Chrysostom the early church father said, "For even the cross, which was a stumbling block to the

Jews, was not so much so as the failure to require obedience to the ancestral laws and traditions; for when they attacked Stephen they said not that he was worshiping the crucified, but that he was speaking against the laws and the Holy Place.

By the way, Saul had persecuted the church for the same reason, not because they acknowledged Christ, but because they were against Judaism. So what we learn here is that false teachers will persecute true teachers, that is, if true teachers tell the truth. You can avoid that if you don't tell the truth. The message of the cross was all Paul ever preached, Christ and Him crucified, never the law.

Paul closes this section with a fierce statement that sums up his attitude, verse 12: "I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves," castrate. "I wish that those that are troubling you would castrate themselves." You say, "Yikes, that's a pretty serious thing to say." And you get the connection to circumcision, but that's not the connection. Well, what is he saying?

Galatia was adjacent to Phrygia. Phrygia was known for the worship of Cybele, C-Y-B-E-L-E, a pagan goddess. This was a dominate worship in the area; and the priests of Cybele and the very devout worshipers of Cybele had themselves castrated. They became eunuchs, eunuchs for the purpose of the worship of Cybele. This is sheer, gross paganism.

Why would Paul ever say this to these Jewish teachers? What he is saying is this: "If you accept circumcision and the Mosaic rituals and rules, you might as well go ahead and castrate yourself and become a full-blown pagan, because that's what you are." This shows you how extreme any deviation from the gospel is. "You are a full-fledged pagan. You might as well do the most severe things pagans do."

I can't imagine what happened when they read that verse. They would be devastated. The Judaizers when they heard it must have been infuriated. They saw themselves as God's representatives; they were full-fledged pagans. There is no room for any alteration of the gospel of salvation by faith. Any deviation and you might as well become a eunuch in a pagan religion, because that's what you are.

Father, we again come before You realizing the impact of what the Word of God says. It is, in one sense, clarifying; and in another sense, terrifying. We have to have the truth, and we have to have the truth about the gospel, and we have to have the truth about those who teach falsely; give boldness to preachers, preach the truth.

We know it's popular to talk about justification by faith, very popular to preach justification by faith, but not so popular to preach that anybody who has any works at all, including baptism or anything else, is a full-fledged pagan representing the kingdom of darkness, preaching another gospel, and is under a divine curse. But this is how prized the true gospel is. Help us to believe it as we have been commanded to do, to obey by believing, and obey by proclaiming the truth. Give us holy boldness for the sake of the truth. People can't be rescued from error unless they know the error they're in.

Lord, I pray that Your gospel will not just be a popular theological trend, but that the full implications of the gospel will take hold of the hearts of preachers, teachers, and believers everywhere, that they would proclaim the true gospel with a holy boldness that would expose those hybrid misrepresentations of the gospel that come from the father of deception himself.

And, Lord, for those who are here with us today, may this be a day for salvation, as You bring some sinners all the way to Christ by faith alone, receiving Him, confessing Him as Savior and Lord. We pray that for Your glory. Amen.

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