

Defending the Gospel
DWJD - Week 10
Galatians 1
11/06/22

Introduction

Pray.

Tim. Pastor. **Galatians 1 + Matthew 16.**

I want to close tonight with what is going to be a bit of a doozy. Our practice for tonight is – **Defending the Gospel.**

Galatians

And I think Galatians 1 is a great place to start tonight, because really the whole book of Galatians is one big defense of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

CONTEXT – The Apostle Paul had planted a group of house churches in this region of the ancient world known as Galatia (Modern day Turkey), but as he often did, he left that church with some local pastors so he could go plant more churches, and in the few years since he had left, some false teachers have entered into the church and are twisting and distorting the gospel message.

The gospel, which Paul reminds the churches of explicitly in 1:3-5 when he writes:

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

The gospel is the good news that Jesus has come, ushering in the kingdom of God, living a perfect life, dying a sinners death on the cross, and rising again defeating satan, sin, and death so that you and I through faith and faith alone in Jesus could be forgiven of our sins and made right with God.

God is good. We are not. Jesus came. Repent and trust in Him.

That's the gospel. And these false teachers are twisting it and distorting, adding to it, and debasing it.

Specifically they are telling these churches of predominantly Gentile (non-Jewish) people, that they must be circumcised like Jews in order to be saved. It's more than just a painful procedure - they are telling them to be right with God you must take on Jewish identity and religious + cultural customs.

It's an ancient form of what is called **syncretism - the fusion of diverse beliefs and practices.**

A little bit of this, a little bit of that - let's mix together some ideologies and worldviews and religions to form a religious expression that is more suitable to what we want.

And in so doing Paul says they're distorting the true Gospel - the foundational message of the Christian faith.

And he goes right after it and them in v6...

6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—

You're not just phoning it in on a certain set of beliefs - you're walking away from God. You're deserting the one true God.

7 not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. 9 As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

Let him be (in the Gk) "anathema" - set apart for destruction. This is no game to Paul. The gospel - the core foundational reality of our Christian faith is at stake and worth defending from those who would twist it and distort it and syncretize it.

Jesus + the Religious Leaders

Now, what Paul is addressing in Galatians, is not unlike what Jesus dealt with on a consistent basis throughout his earthly ministry.

Keep your place in Galatians, but hop over with me to Matthew 16...

Matthew 16:5-12

5 When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. 6 Jesus said to them, "Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

7 And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, "We brought no bread." 8 But Jesus, aware of this, said, "O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? 9 Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? 10 Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? 11 How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

Jesus is always trying to turn their attention off of earthly things and onto the realities of the kingdom of God. Then the key verse which explains it all -

12 Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Just like a little bit of leaven, or yeast, can impact and affect a whole batch of dough, so Jesus warns them - a little bit of false teaching can ruin your faith. So beware of the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

It's important for you to know what this false teaching was...

Pharisees – For the pharisees, they had specific teachings and ways of reading the Torah, the Old Testament Scriptures, that they wanted to impose onto others. They had mixed motivations for sure - but the primary goal was to help people follow God's Laws. So they would take what God had said to his people, and add to it in order to, in their minds, help people stay as far away from disobeying God as possible, so you could live a righteous enough life to get into heaven when you die.

So for instance - if God's law said honor the Sabbath and keep it holy by not working - they felt like that wasn't specific enough. So they added laws on how far you could walk, how much weight you could carry, and so on and so forth - all in an effort to tell people - this is what you must do to be righteous so God will love you.

Sadducees – The Sadducees were slightly different, but had the same problems. They were primarily wealthy, priestly families who, in order to make more money - would twist and distort and add to the ceremonial laws of God - and then enforce them on people who would come to the temple to make sacrifices.

When Jesus overturns the tables in the temple in Mark 11 - that is an attack on the Sadducees. They would turn away the sacrifices brought by those who came to offer them as God commanded in the OT law, instead forcing them to buy their own animals as a way to unjustly make money. That's why Jesus so angrily says they turned what was meant to be a house of prayer for all nations into a den of robbers.

So in Matthew 16, Jesus is warning His disciples about the very issue Paul is now having to address in Galatians some 15 years later.

A twisting and distorting of the teachings of God, trying to add in their own teachings, their own false views - trying to syncretize these beliefs they held over here or wanted over here with the teachings of God - and in so doing keeping people from worshiping the one true God.

And what we see in Matthew 16 and Galatians 1 is clear:

There is no place for tolerating or putting up with anyone who would do this. Anyone who would take the gospel, and co-opt what is true about God, how to be right with Him, what is true about the gospel - and try to syncretize it with their own perspectives and viewpoints and beliefs - no matter how small the false teachings might be - it will ruin the entire thing.

Politics

Everyone tracking so far? All good? Alright that was the easy part. Now let's get personal. Let's bridge the gap from 47 AD to 2022 AD.

There is a great problem today in our culture and in the church with religious syncretism.

There are a whole host of ways today both inside and outside the church that people take the Word of God, take the gospel - and distort it, twist it, add to it, change it, or reshape it - mashing it up together with other ideologies, other viewpoints, other belief systems - and in so doing keep people from worshiping the one true God.

And the most obvious and chief one right on the surface - this syncretism that distorts the gospel - is the world of politics.

Where political opinions, agendas, and ideologies shape our discipleship to Jesus, rather than the one way around.

Politics can so often co-opt the Christian faith.

For example, look at photos like these from from the capital riots of January 6, 2021:



- A man in all black holding tightly to a Bible.
- Or folks praying with their head pushed up against a cross.
- Or a “Jesus is my Savior, Trump is my President” flag.

What do we feel looking at those? Do we sense a righteous anger like Jesus and like Paul - that someone would co-opt the gospel and use Christian symbols to justify, and even encourage an act that was so blatantly unChristian?

In response shortly after the riots, over 500 Christian leaders released a joint statement that reads - **“There is a version of American nationalism that is trying to camouflage itself as Christianity — and it is a heretical version of our faith.”**

How does that quote make you feel?

But those photos, to be honest, aren't difficult for me to show in a room like this - of predominantly Gen-Z and Millennial folks living in an urban city. The majority of us are probably pretty on board that these are not good.

But that's not the only co-opting and syncretism of politics and Christianity happening in our culture today.

Let me show you a different set of images:



- A cross surrounded by a heart, a symbol of love, in support of the murder of the unborn, the numerically worst genocide in human history.
- Or this photo from a Boston church's “Drag Queens and Jesus” worship night.
- Or a clerical collar, what started as a sign throughout various Christian traditions to show a pastor or priest being set apart as celibate to focus on the work of God, now used as a symbol for something else.

What do we feel looking at those? Do we sense a righteous anger like Jesus and like Paul - that someone would co-opt the gospel and use Christian symbols to justify, and even encourage acts that are so blatantly unChristian?

What if we rephrased the quote from the letter - **“There is a version of American progressivism that is trying to camouflage itself as Christianity — and it is a heretical version of our faith.”**

Now just so we're clear, this is not a sermon on politics or sexual ethics, this is a sermon on defending the gospel. The point is to show that both sides are co-opting Christian symbols, trying to syncretize their own political agendas and worldviews and ideologies and in so doing corrupting the true Gospel and keeping people from worshipping the one true God.

But maybe politics aren't your thing.

Maybe you could care less about political agendas or what's happening on CNN or Fox News. The good news for you is that this can go much deeper and be much sneakier and look much more polished than simply the extreme forms of right and left political Pharisaism.

There are a whole host of ways the gospel can be distorted that can twist and corrupt discipleship to Jesus.

Especially in a city like Charlotte. There are currents and streams of thought that are not only lived, but celebrated in this city that run contrary to the ways of Jesus. Ideologies and worldviews and ways of living that would draw us, not to throw away our discipleship to Jesus, but just to sort of mix some things together.

A little DIY faith if you will - some nice teachings from Jesus about the poor, splash of sabbath and contemplative prayer, healthy dose of progressive sexual ethics, radical individualism and the supreme importance of the nuclear family, and just enough religious consumerism to keep us coming back to church but never fully invested.

That's the danger of syncretism in our moment today.

That we would simply mix together these ideologies, these ways of living and being in the world, and seek to overlap them onto the ways of Jesus such that being Christian suddenly looks way more like being American than the Scriptures ever portray it.

I read an article recently by a journalist named Ben Sixsmith, where he addresses this sort of DIY Christianity, and he said something that I thought was so incredibly fascinating and jarring, particularly because he's writing as someone who is not a follower of Jesus.

“[Within the church today] there is mainstream culture, celebrities, fashion, music, modish political activism and a message of self-love, but with a twist of Christianity. Most people stick with mainstream culture [instead of this version of church] because they can have all those things and pre-marital sex. We can see the ‘[American] with a twist of Christianity’ trend everywhere.

He goes on to talk about various ways this happens on the left and the right. Talking about (in sarcasm and jest) how strange it is that both sides say they speak for God even as they say completely opposite things and their “God” just always seems to agree with them. Then he finishes.

So, if Christianity is such an inessential add-on, why become a Christian? I am not religious, so it is not my place to dictate to Christians what they should and should not believe. Still, if someone has a faith worth following, I

feel that their beliefs should make me feel uncomfortable for not doing so. If they share 90% of my lifestyle and values, then there is nothing especially inspiring about them. Instead of making me want to become more like them, it looks very much as if they want to become more like me.”

Jesus with a twist. Gospel with some add-ons to fit into the surrounding culture. Gospel with some add ons that match our predetermined pre-Jesus beliefs. Jesus becomes more tolerable, more suitable to the world around us, more syncretized to the ways of culture.

- Jesus speaks out against it.
- Paul speaks out against it.
- We must speak out against it too.

So then the question becomes - what does it look like, to do what Jesus did, and defend the gospel? When we see things corrupting and polluting the gospel, what do we do?

Unhealthy Deconstruction

Let me tell you what it doesn't look like - it doesn't look like the cultural current of **deconstruction**.

Maybe you've heard this term before.

Deconstruction - “Deconstruction is the process of systematically dissecting and often rejecting the beliefs you grew up with.” (Alyssa Childers)

I don't know that I need to tell you how rampant this is in the Western Church right now.

- A study released by the Pew Research Center on September 13th of this year showed that in the US, of those who grow up within church, 30% will become agnostic or atheist during their 20s.
- Of those in other parts of the Western world - that number rises to as high as 47%.
- One other study released this past summer showed that during the two primary years of Covid alone - March 2020 to March 2022 - 1/3 of Church-goers left the Church and have stated no intention of ever returning.

But for many of us - these are not just statistics. These are stories. These are faces and names and lives.

Maybe you know stories like these - of friends, coworkers, neighbors, family members.

Maybe you are living a story like this – maybe you're on the brink of walking away from Jesus right now. Or maybe you have and you're in church for the first time in forever just asking questions - is faith even viable? What does following Jesus even mean for me today?

I don't claim to know the intricacies of your experience, or most of these other experiences - but I've had enough conversations, listened to enough podcasts, and read enough books to know that a HUGE reason, again not for all, but for many, can be summarized with a statement like the one from my college friend who said to me a few years ago:

“The Jesus I read about in the Bible and the Jesus I saw in the Church just didn't line up, and I didn't know what to do with that, so I left the church to find my faith, and ended up leaving both.”

But that can't be the answer right? Is there a better way?

What I want to tell you in love is that this isn't the answer. Even though it may seem like the only way, because of the hurt and confusing doubts, there is a better way.

This isn't new - Paul is writing in 47 AD to a corrupt church. He'll write a decade later to another one. A corrupt, syncretized, distorting the gospel church isn't new - and yet the gospel has continued to spread across continents and centuries, the church continues to press forward, no matter how corrupt its leaders or how secular a society. So the answer can't simply be to leave our faith behind.

4 Keys to Healthy Deconstruction

So to close, I just want to give us a path for a better way forward. A way to defend the gospel, untether our faith to syncretism from politics or the cultural currents around us, and to move forward in gospel fidelity loving Jesus and His Church.

In other words, let me give you some steps forward into what I would call **Healthy deconstruction – defending the gospel while keeping the faith.**

We'll hit them quickly, all from Galatians 1.

1. Make Scripture the authority.

Another way to say this is to deconstruct culture with the Bible, not the Bible with culture.

If culture and the Bible don't seem to agree, the path forward in the way of Jesus is to go against culture, not the truths of God's Word.

In other words, what we see in the example and ways of Jesus - is using the Scriptures to critique the culture of the Church. You often find this line with Jesus where He says "You have heard it say, but I say to you..." That's what we read in Matthew 5 - "You have heard it said - love your neighbor, hate your enemy." (Well that's not in the original text. That's been added on). So Jesus comes back and says - you've heard this, but I tell you - love your enemies."

Critiquing what's happening in the "church" - synagogue of his day with the truths of the Scriptures. That's a good, healthy deconstruction. Using the Bible to critique the church and the culture - this is what we see with Zwingli, Luther, Calvin and the Reformers, William Wilberforce (abolition of Slavery in Britain - early 1800s) - so many others throughout church history - using the Bible to critique the culture and the church.

The pattern of unhealthy deconstruction we see today tends to do the opposite, it uses culture to critique the Bible. Here's what's happening on the broader landscape in terms of ideologies and worldviews in our culture, here's my predetermined moral views of right and wrong/good and evil - now let me put the Bible through that filter and whatever doesn't line up we toss out or throw away.

That's exactly what Paul is trying to combat in Galatians.

Gal 1:8 – But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.

He's trying to defend the true gospel from false teachers who are saying - here's what is happening in our surrounding culture, let's just teach this instead because it'll line up more with that. He's trying to defend what is right and what is reality about God and taking it out of ways it's been co-opted. It doesn't matter who would say different - even the angels (hyperbole) - we trust what we've received.

Paul says - you've received what is true. You've received what is right. This gospel is the true gospel, don't waver based on anyone else's teachings. Don't waver based on what all of these other people would try to coerce you to believe.

Church, we have what is true in the Scriptures. This is not outdated. This is not old and oppressive. This is the revealed word of God. Written by men carried along by the Holy Spirit. Affirmed by the church for centuries. Thousands of manuscripts. It is trustworthy. The Bible you hold in your hands can be trusted!

And it is our authority because it is the Word of God and God is our authority - so if we disagree with it, we change us, not it. We make it the priority.

So if you are thrown off and disoriented by the Bible and your life, or the Bible and your city, or the Bible and your worldview lining up, don't change the Bible - change you! Change your life! Change your city! Change your worldview!

Let this guide us as authority.

2. Be willing to suffer.

Unhealthy deconstruction leans in on - this part of my faith or the Scriptures seems offensive or repressive or outdated, I'm going to change that.

Healthy deconstruction says - I'm after God's approval. So I'm not co-opting to the world's definition of love. I'm not changing to make my beliefs more swallowable. Now I hold them in love. I hold them in humility. Absolutely. But God is the one who names my identity.

Gal 1:10 – 10 For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

These false teachers, Paul makes clear in the letter, are not teaching a different gospel because they have bad theology - they are doing this because of a desire for personal gain. Since the Jewish establishment in the region at this time was against the early Church, by convincing these gentile converts to become Jewish they are able to sort of hold to these new Christian beliefs about Jesus and the Resurrection they find captivating while also escaping any Jewish persecution that might come their way.

In other words – ***If they're willing to syncretize they're faith with the surrounding cultural norms, then they can get the best stuff of following Jesus with zero cultural backlash.***

But Paul says - I don't care. I don't care what they think of me. I don't care what Peter thinks of me. I don't care what any of these other folks think – I'm not trying to please them. They are not the ones who declare value and worth over me. I don't serve them ultimately, I serve Christ.

The second step in healthy deconstruction is to be willing to suffer.

- Be willing to suffer loss of reputation for standing up for God's truths.
- Be willing to lose friendships.

- Be willing to lose cultural capital.

There are times, if you're seeking to defend the gospel from syncretism and corruption, that you might have to stand alone under pressure.

And I'm not the "doomsday Christian persecution guy" in any sense of the imagination, but I do think it will get harder in regards to friendships and cultural capital to hold to a robust discipleship to Jesus.

I was hanging out with a neighbor of mine a few weeks ago, and I just asked him - "hey would you ever consider coming to check out this church where I pastor?" And he adamantly - "Nope. Never." It seemed more forceful than I was ready for and so I asked why. And he said - "Because Christians are stupid."

And listen to me - that's not persecution. I'm not crying myself to sleep that night, I'll be ok, we're still friends.

But that is the future we're headed to more and more - where having a robust, Biblically-faithful discipleship to Jesus that has God and His Word as our authority is going to cost us more and more - if you want a non-compromising or syncretizing faith that defends the true gospel, you have to be willing to suffer.

You must decide - I am a servant of Christ, not of men.

3. Deal with the inner Pharisee.

If your process of deconstructing what is broken only includes out here, you'll never be able to keep your faith. You must deal with what is broken in here as well.

Gal 1:11-14 – 11 For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. 12 For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. 13 For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. 14 And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.

When Paul comes to faith, he comes out of this same religious tradition he is now trying to defend the gospel against. Paul began his ministry career in the same group of Pharisees Jesus is warning his disciples about in Matthew 16. And the text says before Jesus showed up - he was the most zealous of them all!

But that had to be done away with...When the grace of God appeared, he had to put that behind him - that part of him had to die. He had to healthily deconstruct what was off in his own belief systems, and defend the gospel in his own heart.

And we must do the same.

I think what can happen in our modern moment of deconstruction is that we can spend 99% of our time pointing at all the ways other people are co-opting the gospel and the Christian faith - those people are wrong. Those people are bad.

But the message of the gospel should propel us to turn it onto ourselves as well.

We must deal with our own hearts. We must deal with our own false beliefs and false teachings. We must deal with our own ways we've syncretized our faith and put things onto it in our hearts. We must deal with the ways we've said - "I want Jesus and...". We must deal with all the ways we've tried to live equal parts American and Christian.

We must deal with the inner Pharisee.

4. Reconstruct a beautiful Church.

Healthy deconstruction is the middle of a process of growing in maturity - not the end.

Take it out of strictly religious terms for a second - Secular psychologists talk about there being 3 stages to maturation for every individual:

- **Stage 1 - Construction**
- **Stage 2 - Deconstruction**

This is where our culture (both inside and outside the church) gets stuck and the problem is that we call this maturity. We think it's mature to just stick in a place of doubt and break down.

Premarital Counseling. I see this all the time in premarital counseling. When two folks come from more broken homes, their vision of marriage is shaped mostly by a bunch of things they don't want to be. - "I don't want a marriage like my parents. I don't want to fight like this, argue like this, resent like this." But that vision shaped by only a deconstruction of what is bad, can't actually lead to lasting flourishing. Eventually in order to have a healthy mature flourishing marriage you have to decide what you will be about and build something beautiful as you move towards the future.

And that's I would argue maybe the key difference between healthy and unhealthy deconstruction. You can walk all of the steps appropriately of 1-3. You can have the Bible be your authority, you can be willing to suffer, you can even deal with your own inner Pharisee, but if you stop at stage 2, it's unhealthy.

Unhealthy deconstruction stops at stage 2 and calls it maturity. But that's stopping at adolescence. Maturity - healthy deconstruction moves on to stage 3.

- **Stage 3 - Reconstruction**

It builds back something beautiful in its place.

What I love about the Matthew 16 passage and this teaching from Jesus on 'beware of the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees' is what comes after it. Jesus spends quite a bit of his time on earth deconstructing what is broken and corrupted in the religious system of his day. But he never stops there.

There's this really saying right now in the church that "Jesus is not about religion. He's about relationship." Now, if what you mean by that is - you can't just go through the religious motions - church, bible reading, prayer - that you actually have to know Jesus and walk with Him then I say yes and amen!

But don't misread the Bible - **Jesus isn't anti-religion, he's anti-corruption.**

He's anti people twisting and distorting true worship of God for their own purposes. Which is why right after he tells them to beware of the false teaching of religious leaders, he says in v18...

Matt 16:18 – And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

I know this is corrupt right now, but I'm building something beautiful back in its place. I'm building my Church. Nothing and no one can prevail against it.

Conclusion

This is the invitation for us as we follow Jesus:

We look at what is broken and co-opted and syncretized with the gospel - in the culture, in the church, in our own hearts - and we deconstruct, we break down what is not in line with the Scriptures, in line with God's reality and authority and the ways of Jesus, and we build back a more beautiful church.

A church flourishing in the ways of Jesus. A church willing to look more like the Kingdom of God than the Kingdom of America (right or left). A church flourishing with the gospel at the center.

Because the gospel is our message. It is our hope.

And part of how we defend it is by celebrating communion every time we gather together on Sundays.