God's Word is Life

GALATIANS: FOR FREEDOM CHRIST HAS SET US FREE

Session One: NO OTHER GOSPEL

Texts: Galatians 1–2, especially 1:3–10 and 2:11–21

Central Theme

The Gospel announces that Christ has given himself for sinners. Nothing we add can make his gift more complete. Yet we are remarkably persistent in trying to turn that gift into an arrangement under which we can establish something of our own.

Paul writes because the Galatians are being drawn back into that arrangement. His concern is pastoral. People who have heard that they belong to Christ are being told that something more is required.

The question running through this session is simple: Is Christ enough for the person I actually am?

1. GRACE BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE

Paul begins with grace and peace. Before he confronts the Galatians, he announces Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age.

Notice where the action begins. Christ gives himself. He does not wait until the Galatians understand their predicament or arrange a sufficiently convincing repentance. The rescue begins with the rescuer.

We tend to begin elsewhere. We begin with the condition of our faith, the quality of our obedience, or the troubling distance between the person we intended to become and the one who got up this morning.

Paul begins with Christ. That is where the Gospel puts our life.

2. WHY PAUL IS SO DISTURBED

At 1:6, the letter turns abruptly. Paul is astonished that they are deserting the one who called them in grace.

We might prefer a less agitated apostle. But imagine someone telling a frightened child that the welcome home was provisional after all. Certain requirements remain to be met. The door is open, but the child should not become too comfortable.

That is what Paul hears happening to his people. Christ has received them, and now their belonging is being placed in doubt.

His anger serves the promise. The issue is what these people will have to rely upon when their own adequacy gives way.

3. THE ADDITION THAT TAKES EVERYTHING AWAY

The pressure upon the Gentile believers concerned circumcision and observance of the law. Faith in Christ was being made insufficient as the basis of their standing among God's people.

The addition may have sounded reasonable. Why object to greater religious seriousness?

Because a condition changes what the sinner hears. The promise now sends us back to examine whether we have fulfilled our part. And once that question has become the foundation, there is no obvious place to stop examining.

We can do the same thing with experiences, devotional habits, or a particular kind of moral respectability.

Christ receives you. But first…

Paul's letter asks what has happened to the Gospel at that point.

4. EVEN THE PREACHER STANDS UNDER THE GOSPEL

Paul's warning in 1:8 includes himself. Even if he should preach another gospel, the Galatians must not receive it merely because Paul is speaking.

That is a necessary word for the church. A preacher's personality, learning, and authority cannot turn a condition into a promise. Neither can the affection we feel for the preacher.

The question is what is being given to the hearer. Is Christ being proclaimed as the sinner's righteousness? Or is the hearer being sent away to complete the transaction?

Pastoral authority serves the Gospel. It does not possess the right to revise its terms.

5. THE PERSECUTOR WHO WAS CALLED

Paul tells his own story in 1:13–24. He had been zealous, accomplished, and deeply convinced that he was right. That conviction had made him a persecutor.

Sincerity does not make religion harmless. A person may be entirely devoted to his religion and still be destroying the neighbor in its name.

Paul describes God calling him by grace and revealing his Son. His religious achievement did not bring him to Christ. Christ interrupted the life in which those achievements had given him confidence.

The Gospel does not begin by finding the promising part of Paul. God calls the persecutor and gives him a future.

6. TITUS DOES NOT NEED ANOTHER QUALIFICATION

Titus appears in 2:1–5 as a concrete person whose freedom matters. He is a Gentile Christian. He is not compelled to undergo circumcision.

This can sound like an ancient administrative dispute until we recognize the question beneath it: Does this person already belong, or must he become someone else before the church can receive him fully?

For Paul, Christ has answered that question.

The same conversation includes remembering the poor. Freedom does not empty the world of obligations. It puts them in their proper place. The poor need our help; their need is not a fee charged for our entrance into God's household.

7. THE TABLE CAN CONTRADICT THE SERMON

Then Peter withdraws from eating with Gentile believers. He has been sharing their table, but the arrival of certain people makes him afraid.

Nobody needs to deliver a speech. The withdrawal speaks for itself.

We know how that feels. A place that seemed secure suddenly becomes uncertain. We begin wondering what is wrong with us and what we must change to be received again.

Paul confronts Peter because this behavior is out of step with the Gospel. Christ's welcome has been contradicted by the arrangement of the chairs.

There is a question here for every congregation: Does our common life give people reason to doubt the promise our preaching announces?

8. THROUGH THE LAW I DIED TO THE LAW

In 2:19, Paul speaks of dying to the law through the law. He has not discovered that God's command was unimportant. He has come to the end of the attempt to establish his righteousness by fulfilling it.

The law reaches the person behind the defense. It finds the self-interest inside our generosity and the pride inside our correct opinions. Our account of ourselves will not bear the weight we place upon it.

The law cannot raise the person it exposes. Its demand gives no life.

Paul therefore takes us to Christ's death. The end of our defense is not the end of God's mercy.

9. CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST

Galatians 2:20 gives us the center of Paul's confession. He has been crucified with Christ, and yet he lives. Christ lives in him.

Paul has not disappeared. His particular life remains, with its work and suffering. What has been judged and brought to an end is his claim to establish himself before God.

This is the death-and-life movement that matters so much in Forde's theology. Grace does not merely assist the old self in becoming a more successful religious person. Christ gives life where that self's claim has ended.

We remain ourselves, but our righteousness is no longer a possession we must manufacture and defend.

10. HE GAVE HIMSELF FOR ME

Paul's language becomes personal. The Son of God loved him and gave himself for him.

We can speak correctly about the love of God and still keep it at a safe distance. We can admire the doctrine while assuming that our own case remains an exception.

Paul will not leave the promise suspended above the person who needs it. Christ gave himself for this sinner.

The pastoral word must finally reach that same place. Christ has given himself for you. The failure you cannot forget is not unknown to him. Your conscience does not have to find a way around the cross to secure a more dependable verdict.

11. WHEN FAITH BECOMES ANOTHER MEASUREMENT

Someone will ask, "But do I believe strongly enough?"

We should hear the weariness in the question. The person has stopped measuring obedience and begun measuring faith. The measuring continues.

Faith lives from the one who promises. Its comfort is not a favorable report about the strength of its own believing. A trembling person can receive a dependable word.

When a child is afraid in the night, we do not begin by examining the quality of the child's trust. We speak and remain near.

So the church speaks Christ's promise again. He is faithful when our confidence is not.

12. IF RIGHTEOUSNESS COMES THROUGH THE LAW

Paul ends chapter 2 with a conclusion that gives the whole argument its urgency. If righteousness comes through law, Christ died to no purpose.

Our additions can seem modest to us. Paul asks us to consider what they say about the cross.

Christ has not left a small unpaid balance for the conscientious believer. He has given himself for sinners. We are not asked to make his death effective by becoming the kind of people for whom it would have been sensible to die.

Your life before God rests in Christ.

That is the word Paul will not surrender.

CLOSING

Where do you most often look for reassurance that you are acceptable to God?

What conditions have you heard attached to Christ's welcome, perhaps without anyone intending to change the Gospel?

Why does the incident at Peter's table matter for the life of a congregation?

And how would you answer the person who says, "I understand that Christ died for sinners. I am less certain that I can rely upon him for me"?

As we finish, return to 2:20. The promise does not become more dependable when we feel more dependable. Christ has given himself for you. You may rest there.