

Called by God

Galatians 1:11-24

Who was the greatest theologian in Christian history? You might say Augustine, or John Calvin, or Charles Hodge, but Paul of Tarsus was arguably the greatest of theologians. In addition to his impeccable logic and immense knowledge, Paul was uniquely called by God as His apostle to the nations. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul, through divine inspiration, clearly and masterfully sets forth the doctrine of salvation. In defending the truth of the Gospel, Paul reminds us that we are justified by faith apart from works—that is, by faith alone.

Galatians was written in response to Satanic attacks on the Gospel coming from within the churches themselves. Paul warned the churches to beware of the Judaizers, a group that was gaining increasing influence in the churches and was proclaiming a false gospel. Who exactly were the Judaizers? The Judaizers were Jews who claimed to be Christians, but they wanted to make the church Jewish; they believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but they also claimed that Gentiles had to become like the Jews in order to be saved. The Judaizers argued that those who were not ethnically Jewish could not become Christians unless they kept the works of the law of Moses. They said, “To be a Christian, you must be circumcised and keep the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, including its dietary restrictions and holy days and festivals.” Like all false gospels, their plan of salvation was man-centered and works-centered.

We read last time in Galatians, chapter 1, that the churches were buying into these false teachings, turning away from the grace of Christ to a different gospel, which is not good news at all (1:6). Paul says that the Judaizers perverted the gospel of Christ (1:7) and therefore were under the eternal condemnation of God (1:8, 9). In Galatians 2:4, Paul refers to the Judaizers as “false brethren,” which proves that despite their claims to the contrary, they were not brothers in Christ at all.

God is faithful to raise up godly men to defend His Truth when it is under attack. The Lord raised up the apostle Paul to confront this dangerous teaching head on. With great boldness and precision, Paul preached the one, true Gospel, which is God-centered and grace-centered, and he defended the Truth of God against the assaults being waged against the Church by these professing Christians who actually were wolves in sheep’s clothing.

In this study we will examine Galatians 1:11-24:

11 But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. 12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught *it*, but *it came* through the revelation of Jesus Christ. 13 For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and *tried to* destroy it. 14 And I advanced in Judaism beyond

many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. 15 But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called *me* through His grace, 16 to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those *who were* apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. 18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. 19 But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. 20 (Now *concerning* the things which I write to you, indeed, before God, I do not lie.) 21 Afterward I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. 22 And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which *were* in Christ. 23 But they were hearing only, "He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once *tried to* destroy." 24 And they glorified God in me." (New King James translation)

Paul's epistle to the Galatians begins in chapter 1 with this greeting: "Paul, an apostle (not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead)" (1:1). Paul begins his letter to the Galatian churches by emphasizing that it is God who called him to the office of an apostle. He did not choose God; rather, God chose him. God called him. The word *apostle* means "one who is sent." The apostles were sent out by Christ as His messengers, to finish laying the foundation for the Church of the new covenant, which Jesus had already begun to lay. In order to be an apostle, a man had to have seen the resurrected Christ. Paul was not one of the twelve disciples that accompanied Jesus during His earthly ministry; he was called later to be an apostle.

Luke recounts Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus in Acts, chapter 9. Let us read Acts, chapter 9, beginning at verse 1: "Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3 As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. 4 Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" 5 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." 6 So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" Then the Lord *said* to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." (9:1-6)

Since the resurrected Christ supernaturally appeared to Saul, he was qualified to be an apostle. Later in chapter 9, the Lord reveals that Paul is God's "chosen instrument" to proclaim Christ to the nations. Paul now is addressing the churches of Galatia, located in modern-day Turkey.

Galatians 1:11-12 “But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. 12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught *it*, but *it came* through the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

The heretical Judaizers attacked not only the Gospel but also Paul’s credentials. The Judaizers sought to undermine Paul’s authority, claiming that he received his apostleship from the Jerusalem apostles and that he was now acting in rebellion against them. This claim is refuted in Galatians, chapter 2, when James, Peter, and John, the leaders of the Jerusalem church, affirm Paul’s apostleship and calling and affirm that Paul does in fact preach the true gospel of God.

Paul counters that the gospel he preaches is not *his* gospel but *God’s* gospel. He did not receive it from any man or church, nor was he taught it by any man. It came directly to him, supernaturally, from Christ Himself. The Bible teaches that all the words of Scripture are inspired by God or breathed out from God under the supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit.

In contrast to Paul, the Judaizers received their religious teachings from the tradition of the rabbis. Just as is the case for many professing Christians today, the Jews did not study the Scriptures for themselves. Instead, they relied on human interpretations of Scripture. Many of their traditions not only were not taught in Scripture but also contradicted it (Mark 7:13; *MacArthur Bible*, p. 1789).

The apostle Paul did not serve any man; he served God alone. Remember that he said in Galatians 1:10: “For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.”

What about you? Do you seek to please other people more than God?

If you are a Christian, you must seek to please God above all others.

Are you afraid of offending other people, or are you more concerned about pleasing Christ?

Are you more concerned about people liking you, or are you more concerned about their eternal souls?

My friends, God calls us, like Paul, to be God-pleasers, not men-pleasers.

Of course, we like it when others like us. But what good is it for others to like us if God detests us? Do you remember what God told the members of the church at Laodicea in Revelation, chapter 3? He said, “because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth” (Rev. 3:16).

Do we want to be a lukewarm church? Or do we want to stand boldly for Christ and His Truth?

Unlike Paul, many pastors today are tempted to avoid controversial or unpopular subjects. After all, it isn't pleasant to say something that may offend others. Yet, as a pastor, God will hold me accountable as to whether I am faithful in preaching to you the "whole counsel of God." If I shrink back from my calling, I am not being faithful to my shepherd, Jesus Christ. If my greatest concern is to please other people, I would be denying Christ. I would not be His bondservant.

Martin Luther, the great German Reformer, said, "If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved; and to be steady on all the battlefield besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point."¹

Clearly, it was the Judaizers, not Paul, whose teachings were according to man instead of God. Their so-called gospel was pleasing to men, but not to God.

In Galatians 1:13-14, Paul reminds us of his dark past before he knew God's grace: "For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and *tried to* destroy it. 14 And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers."

Paul was raised as Saul of Tarsus. He was not only an unbeliever, but the worst type of unbeliever, a persecutor of Christians. Saul consented to the murder of Stephen and began to wreak havoc on the church, going from house to house, dragging off men and women and putting them in prison (Acts 8:1, 3). Saul was en route to Damascus, Syria, hoping to bring a number of Christians back to Jerusalem for trial and even to be put to death. He was a hater of God, a hater of Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 26:9).

Ironically, Saul of Tarsus, thought that he was a faithful, religious man. Paul writes in Philippians 3:4-6 that he was "circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless."

Saul was a zealous Jew, but he was not a true, spiritual Jew. His religion was outward, not inward; it was based on law-keeping and works, not forgiveness and grace; it was based on human traditions, not Scripture alone. In the final analysis, Saul, like the Judaizers, was blinded and deceived by Satan. He was led by the devil, not by the Spirit. His body was circumcised, but his heart was not. He had zeal for the law, but not for God. He was really religious, but not saved. He was stubborn, prideful, and spiritually dead in his trespasses and sin

¹ Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Briefwechsel*, 18 vols. (Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1930-85), 3:81.

(cf. Jer. 9:14; Eph. 2:1). He sought to be justified by keeping the law, not by trusting in the one, true God and His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

We should note that like the Judaizers, who falsely thought themselves to be true followers of God, prior to his conversion, the apostle Paul was exceedingly zealous for the **traditions** of his fathers. Yet, Paul says that this was one sign of his unregenerate heart. He followed tradition, not the Word of God.

Are you more zealous for Christ and His Word or for the traditions of your ancestors?

God did have a purpose in Saul's upbringing. Saul's teacher, Gamaliel, was one of the most famous rabbis of his time and probably a grandson of Rabbi Hillel, the leader of one of the two great schools of Jewish legal interpretation. Saul's upbringing as a Jew and a Roman citizen and his immense knowledge of the Old Testament and Greek thought, prepared him to be the logical, precise, clear, powerful teacher and preacher that he was. In fact, Paul is arguably the greatest theologian in the history of Christianity.

Galatians 1:15-17 "But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called *me* through His grace, 16 to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those *who were* apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

Paul's salvation is a testimony to the grace of God toward even the vilest, most rebellious, of sinners. Paul gives us his testimony of God's grace at work in his life. So it is also appropriate for each of us to give a public testimony of our faith. When a man or woman becomes a member of the church, or when a baptized infant becomes a communicant member, it is appropriate for them to give their testimony of how God's grace has been at work in their lives.

The Lord separated Paul from his mother's womb. Similarly, the LORD told Jeremiah the prophet, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5). So we see that God sets us apart unto specific callings even before birth.

However, note that Paul did not become a believer until adulthood. And so it is today; God redeems us in His good timing. Therefore, Christian parents, you should not push your children to profess faith in Christ and become communicant members until they are ready. However, even an unborn child already has a mind, a spirit, and a soul. And, God, in His grace, can regenerate a child even before he is born. So neither should we think our child is too young to make a credible profession of faith. We must remember that God calls us and redeems us according to His timetable, not ours.

Paul elsewhere explains that salvation is a free gift; it cannot be earned or deserved by anything we do. God chooses His elect even before they are born or have the opportunity to do anything good or bad (Rom. 9:10-13; Eph. 1:4-6).

Paul was chosen by God, called by God, as His “chosen vessel” to bear Christ’s name “before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15). Who is a Gentile? A Gentile refers to anyone who is not a Jew. Paul preached Christ to the Jews, but his primary calling was to preach Christ among the Gentile nations.

So what did Paul preach? Paul does not preach himself, but Jesus Christ as Lord (2 Cor. 4:5). Paul knows that the power of the Gospel does not reside in him or in any special technique, program, tool, gimmick, or manmade invention; the power of the Gospel is of God, not man (2 Cor. 4:7).

Three days after his conversion, Paul met with Ananias, whom God ordained to reveal his calling as apostle to the Gentiles. However, Paul did not “confer with flesh and blood” so as to get input from others regarding his ministry. Nor did he seek the approval of those who were already apostles (such as Peter and John). Instead of going to Jerusalem after his conversion, Paul went to the desert area of Arabia to receive direct revelation and training from God. Paul emphasizes that his calling as apostle to the Gentiles came from God Himself and not from the leaders of the Jerusalem church. As an apostle, Paul didn’t need any man to approve of his ministry.

Today, pastors are accountable first and foremost to God. However, in His wisdom, God has made us accountable to others as well. God has ordained in His Church for godly pastors and elders in a particular region to set apart a man for pastoral ministry and confirm that he has been ordained by God to this office. Ordained pastors are accountable to other elders and pastors and above all to Christ, who is the Chief Shepherd over His Church.

Galatians 1:18-19 “Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. 19 But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother.

After three years, Paul made his first trip to Jerusalem after having become a Christian. He desired to see Peter. Peter, whose name in Aramaic is Cephas, was one of Jesus’ twelve disciples, an associate of John Mark who wrote the Gospel of Mark, and Peter was the author of 1st and 2nd Peter. Peter is prominently featured in the early chapters of Acts as the bold apostle to the Jews. Paul visited with Peter for just over two weeks, but he saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord’s half-brother. In Acts, Luke adds that the disciples were afraid of Paul, for they could not believe that this persecutor of Christians had really been converted (Acts 9:26).

This James is not the disciple James who is frequently mentioned alongside Peter and John in the Gospels. In the earliest days of the church, the disciple James was murdered by Herod (Acts 12:2). The James referred to in Galatians is Jesus' half-brother, who at first did not believe in Jesus (John 7:5) but later was converted, perhaps as a result of seeing the resurrected Christ (1 Cor. 15:7).

Paul likely visited with Peter and James so as to get firsthand testimony about the life and teaching of Jesus. After all, Peter was one of Jesus' closest disciples, and James was his half-brother (cf. Matt. 13:55).

Over the next fourteen years, the Judaizers progressively infiltrated the churches, and it appears that James, Peter, and John were tolerant of them and their false teachings. Thus, in Galatians 2, we read that Paul would return to Jerusalem fourteen years later, to admonish the other apostles to stand up for the true gospel of grace and oppose the false teachings of the Judaizers.

Galatians 1:20-24 "(Now *concerning* the things which I write to you, indeed, before God, I do not lie.) 21 Afterward I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. 22 And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which *were* in Christ. 23 But they were hearing only, "He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once *tried to* destroy." 24 And they glorified God in me."

Having left Jerusalem, Paul returned to his hometown of Tarsus, which was the most important city in Cilicia (Acts 9:30). History recounts that this portion of Cilicia was part of the Roman province of Syria during the early first century.

Up to this point, Paul had spent most of his time as an apostle among the Gentiles in Arabia and Syria, so he was "unknown by face to the churches of Judea which were in Christ." Nevertheless, Paul was famous, as word had spread of his conversion and of the apostolic ministry that had been entrusted to him. The people were saying, "He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy."

What a testimony to God's grace! What an encouragement this must have been to the young believers. The God of grace had redeemed Saul of Tarsus, the vile persecutor of Christians and hater of Christ, and had made him the greatest defender and preacher of Christ that the world has ever known.

In Acts chapter 9 we read that as soon as Paul received the Holy Spirit and was baptized, "**immediately he preached the Christ** in the synagogues, **that He is the Son of God**. 21 Then all who heard were amazed, and said, "Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?" 22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, **proving that this Jesus is the Christ**" (20-22).

God was glorified through the apostle Paul's faithful preaching of Christ and His law-free gospel of grace. And so God is also glorified as His name is exalted today among the nations, as those of every tribe, tongue, nation and people hear the good news of Jesus, the only name by which we may be saved.

Jesus gave us a **Great Commission**. He said, “. . . go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:18-20).

Brothers and sisters, are we faithfully obeying Jesus' command?

Let me leave you with three applications that flow from our text.

The first application is: The Gospel is not according to man but through the revelation of Jesus Christ (v. 11). God has revealed His will to us through His holy Word, the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments. The revelation of Jesus Christ is found in God's Word and nowhere else. As Christians, we should never look to ***the world***, which is under the control and power of Satan, for our answers to questions concerning faith, doctrine, life, or relationships. Nor should we look to ***the traditions*** of the Church, the traditions of our fathers, as an *equivalent* source of truth. It can be helpful and quite beneficial to study their writings, but we should never place tradition above or alongside Scripture. Rather, God's Word alone is the Christian's all-sufficient source of Truth. His Word is sufficient to give us all that we need for life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3).

Let us not rely solely on the teachings of any church, pastor, evangelist or teacher. Let us study and examine the Scriptures for ourselves. As Christians, we all have a duty to study God's Word. Have you read through the entire Bible? I challenge you to do so. Resolve this day that you will read through the entire Old and New Testaments. Start with the New Testament and then go to the Old. Or read through one book from the Old Testament and one from the New at the same time.

God has given us pastors and teachers to equip, teach, guide, and shepherd us. We can also benefit greatly from reading commentaries and good books written by those who have gone before us. But we must never neglect to read, study, memorize, and meditate upon God's Word. Only God's Word is unfailing, without error, and God-breathed.

The second application is: If we are Christians we should joyfully desire to testify to God's grace in our lives, just as Paul does in this passage of Scripture.

The apostle Peter says, “sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always *being* ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pet. 3:15).

Has God saved you?

Are you sharing your faith with others?

Are you testifying to God’s grace in your life, both in word and deed?

Can you defend your faith when skeptics question it?

The third application is: God has a unique calling for every one of His children. He has given us each spiritual gifts (cf. Rom. 12:6).

Ephesians 2:10: “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (NIV).

God chose us before the foundation of the world to glorify Him through our good works and to enjoy Him forever.

Paul says in Ephesians, chapter 4 that in addition to His inerrant Word, God has given us pastors and teachers to “equip . . . the saints for the work of ministry” so that the body of Christ shall be edified” (11-12).

What are your spiritual gifts?

God calls all His children to serve, to love, to give, to evangelize, and so on. But He gives us special gifts and unique personalities.

Has God called you to a special ministry to the poor, to single mothers, to drug addicts, to widows, to orphans, to cancer patients, to the sick, to prisoners, to immigrants, or to an unreached people group overseas?

What has God equipped you to do?

What has God called you to do?

If you resist God’s call on your life out of fear, out of laziness, out of apathy, or out of rebellion, He will not bless you.

Do not resist God’s call.

If He is calling you to a particular ministry, then pursue it.

Let us follow Paul’s example. He said, “Imitate me, just as I also *imitate* Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1).

Let us make it our goal to please Christ.

Let us labor for His eternal kingdom.

Let us live as the called of God. Amen.