

The Third Sunday of Pentecost

June 5, 2016

Prayer of the Day: O God, the strength of all who trust in you, mercifully hear our prayers. Be gracious to us in our weakness and give us strength to keep your commandments in all we say and do; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Verse of the Day: Alleluia! God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation Alleluia! (2 Corinthians 5:19)

Sermon Text: Galatians 1:11-24

It goes something like this. A group of spies huddle together in a hotel room. They wait to meet a never-before-seen agent by the name of John Smith, from 107 Park Place, New York.

Eventually they hear a knock at the door. Someone gets up, walks to the door, and opens it. A man enters and introduces himself as John Smith, from 107 Park Place, New York. He continues by describing his spy training. He talks about his past missions. He even explains pieces of their current mission.

This little group listens and begin to recognize that his words sound genuine. So, one by one, the group shares their identities, describe their training, and reveal more pieces of the mission. They trust him.

Soon after, they hear another knock at the door. Someone gets up, walks to the door, and opens it. Another man enters, introducing himself as John Smith, from 107 Park Place, New York. This little group is instantly confused. They sit and listen as John Smith #2 describes his spy training, his past missions, and pieces of their current mission. No matter what this John Smith #2 says, the group simply cannot trust him. Then when someone points

Galatians 1:11-24

¹¹ I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. ¹² I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

¹³ For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴ I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. ¹⁵ But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus.

¹⁸ Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother. ²⁰ I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. ²¹ Later I went to Syria and Cilicia. ²² I was personally unknown to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. ²³ They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." ²⁴ And they praised God because of me.

at the first John Smith from 107 Park Place, New York, this second man immediately defends himself, claiming that he is the true John Smith and the other man an imposter.

It leaves this group trying to decide who the true John Smith is—and who to trust. One man can harm the group; the other will help. One has false information; the other holds the truth. **WHO ARE YOU LISTENING TO?**

That question not only comes up when meeting strangers, but it is a question that pops up in your worship life, does it not? **WHO ARE YOU LISTENING TO?**

That question headlines our reading from Galatians. Understand a little more about this church in Galatia. Galatia is territory of the Roman Empire, nestled near the center of present-day Turkey. The apostle Paul planted a group of Christian churches there. As their pastor he preaches, gives encouragement for Christian living, and guides the congregation's ministry. Yet, Paul is still a traveling missionary. Since he leaves so often, he appoints congregational leaders to read sermons at worship and to keep people's hearts centered on Jesus.

Now, while on one of his missionary journeys, some disturbing news reaches Paul. Another religious group had joined the congregation. They had God's Word in hand; there is no mistaking that. In fact, they claimed to have God's pure commandments. This new group did not deny that Jesus died for the sins of the world. No, they taught that— but they said that Jesus did not completely wash away every sin. There were still some sins that had to be removed— and so the Galatians must finish saving themselves. Men must be circumcised in order to show they belong to the family of God. Christians must stay away from certain foods— like seafood and pork. Worship must be on a specific day with a specific style of worship. The claim was, if the Galatians wanted to be [so-called] real Christians, then they had to follow these rules.

Yet, that message was completely different from what Paul had taught. Paul declared that Jesus Christ paid for the sins of the world in full. He preaches: *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us... He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit* ([Galatians 3:13-14](#)).

You have two men, both calling themselves “God-approved” preachers, both urging the congregation to listen to them, both wanting to be trusted. In fact, this new group even went so far as to accuse Paul of being a false apostle. They suggested that one day Paul woke up and appointed himself as a messenger of God. He sat down, made up some nice teachings people would want to hear, and then started preaching. So, this new group urges the Galatian Christians to ignore Paul— to lock the doors on him and make sure he never comes back.

That is a serious charge, is it not? **WHO DO YOU LISTEN TO?** I mean, does that question float through your mind when it comes to the Bible's teachings? The obvious answer would be: “We want to hear God's pure Word,” right?

Is that what you follow? God tells that you are *saved by grace alone* as his gift to you and... *not by [your] works* ([Ephesians 2:8-9](#)). Still, do you feel that God will only want to forgive you because you are trying hard to be a good person, pray to certain people, and eat certain foods on certain days? God tells you that *faith is a gift of God... worked by the Holy Spirit* ([Ephesians 2:1-5](#); [1 Corinthians 12:3](#)). Yet, do we ever feel that we believe in God

because we made the effort to invite God into our hearts? God urges and pleads with you: *Watch your life and your doctrine closely! (1 Timothy 4:16)* Are we willing to sacrifice the Bible's teachings because the world labels your church as "old" or "boring" or "not-full-of-young-people?" Are you willing to sacrifice the Bible's teachings for a church that fits cravings for worldly praise?

God clearly spells out his saving promises— and urges you to hold onto them! Yet, if we do not listen to God, then **WHO ARE WE LISTENING TO?** If we listen to teachings not found in the Bible, then we are listening to someone who has not sent his Son to save us. If we listen to a mind which puts itself over God, then we are listening to someone who cannot rescue us from the pits of hell. If we listen to a heart which loves the world more than God, then we are listening to someone who rejects the pure promises God has made. To not listen to God is to listen to the manmade teaches Paul warns against!

So, **WHO ARE YOU LISTENING TO?** The answer to that question is a matter of life and death! Paul knew that! He is witnessing his beloved Galatian congregation tiptoe to the verge of tumbling into his old wrong beliefs. If the congregation thinks they can save themselves, then they would reject the Savior and go to hell!

So, Paul pours his heart out to steer them straight! He points back to his former way of life as a warning. **For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.** Paul was a trained Pharisee, part of the religious group that added over 400 manmade commandments to God's original Ten Commandments. In fact, Paul studied the Old Testament laws and regulations more than anyone else in his class. He loved the traditions of his forefathers so much that he embraced them and defended them. He was so devoted to the teachings of Judaism that he persecuted the church of God. If anyone would say that Jesus did not do enough to save you, it would have been Paul.

Yet, Paul does not preach that message; he preaches something not manmade. **God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles.** God shared with Paul very important news; he shared the gospel with him.

You hear the gospel every Sunday. The word "gospel" simply means good news. You hear (1) the good news that Jesus entered the world in the first place— and so you smile as you follow a gospel reading.

The word "gospel" has a more specific sense. It means (2) "the good news that Jesus died and removed all of your sins." Paul experienced that gospel. Jesus died for him, a man who murdered innocent people. Jesus died for him, a man who actually fought against God by attacking believers. Jesus died for him, a man who thought he could earn heaven by himself. Jesus died for Paul, washed away his every filthy stain, and made him white as snow!

Jesus has done the same for you. For the times you think you can earn God's forgiveness, Jesus actually earns God's approval for you. For the times you think you are saved because of a choice you made, Jesus points you to his cross, that object by which he saved you. For the times your heart wants to change Bible teachings, Jesus' heart beats with

perfect love for God's every Word! Jesus died for you, washed away your every filthy stain, and made you white as snow!

Jesus shared this gospel directly with Paul while he traveled on the road to Damascus ([Acts 9](#)). Jesus comes to you directly through that same Word. He comes to you at the waters of baptism and declares your sins washed away. In the Lord's Supper, Jesus comes to you and assures you that he has removed your sins as far as the east is from the west. He repeatedly comes and promises you that he—and he alone—has made complete payment for your sin. God has reconciled you to himself through Jesus! ([2 Corinthians 5:19](#)).

This teaching no man can make up. Paul himself says that: **I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus...** Paul had no chance to make up his preaching. He did not sit down with Peter to create a new religion. James, the brother of Jesus, did not feed him the words to say. Paul and the other apostles did not gather at church council meetings and draft up rules that their church would follow. No, Paul spent time out in Arabia—a place with few people living out there. He studied God's Word. He saw Jesus obey every commandment. He understood that God forgave him because of Jesus.

The words Paul believed did not bring manmade results; they worked results only God could work. **[Others] only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they praised God because of me.**

The Word of God has already been at work in you. It has made you a child of God. God's promise of eternal life is yours because Jesus has earned it and Jesus has given it to you ([Romans 6:23](#)).

This Word continues strengthening your faith in what Jesus has done for you. Manmade teachings can never, ever soothe a guilty conscience. God's teaching of his Son for you can. Manmade teachings can never assure a heart that it is forgiven. God's teaching that Jesus died on the cross declares a completed fact. Manmade teachings will always change to suit the wants of the world. God's teaching of free forgiveness through Jesus alone will always apply to all people of all ages.

There will be times when you feel like that spy group deciding who the true John Smith is—and which one to trust. One man can harm the group; the other will help. One has false information; the other holds the truth. **WHO ARE YOU LISTENING TO?**

Yet, God's Word rings clear as we study the original words and their original meanings. You know the words in their correct context. You have taken catechism classes. You have Sunday School for your children and you can attend Bible Class. You have opportunities to see what God has done for you. When you understand the point God makes, you are able to see present-day examples to which those points apply.

That, my friends, is what truly matters—what God says and a heart that gladly listens to all of it. **WHO ARE YOU LISTENING TO?**