

Spirit-Filled Living Series

Distortions of the Gospel (Gal. 1:6-9)

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At A Glance:

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These sermon study notes are designed to be a tool used after listening to the sermon. This resource is a guide to help deepen understanding regarding the Scriptures and ideas presented in the sermon. Those who use these study notes are encouraged to look up, read through, and think about Scripture references in this guide. There is more information in these notes than what is presented in the sermon. These study notes are designed to be used as an independent study tool to help the formation of Biblical convictions, character, and conduct.

Distortions of the Gospel

I. Introduction

A. Illustration: Are Mormons Christians?

1. As a youth pastor, I had to interact with many questions that were being asked to clarify the truth of Christianity. In the modern era with technology and access to more information than has ever been made available before, young people were getting exposed to a significant number of other spiritual viewpoints. This exposure created a lot of confusion and questions.
2. On one occasion, I was asked, “Are Mormons (also called Latter Day Saints) Christians?”¹ As this student listened to Mormons talk and as they explained their perspective, it sounded an awful lot like Christianity. The same words and vocabulary were being used. Mormons even call themselves the church of Jesus Christ.

The central doctrine of the gospel is the atonement of Jesus Christ. The Prophet Joseph Smith said, “The first principles and ordinances of the Gospel are: first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, Repentance; third: Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; fourth, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost.”²

3. The gospel message being communicated appeared to be the same as what is taught in the Christian churches this student was familiar with. The question being asked is understandable and normal. This student was a little confused and thought something might be off but wasn’t able to tell the difference between the Mormon gospel and the Christian gospel.

- B. Confusion over the gospel and the core message of Christianity is dealt with at the beginning of Paul’s letter to the churches in the region of Galatia. This topic is just as relevant today given our easy access to a variety of spiritual viewpoints. Paul demonstrates the importance of knowing the central core message of Christianity, called the gospel, because it will determine our ability to recognize what is truly Christian and identify the proper course of life connected to that message. If we get the core message wrong, it will set us on an unhealthy spiritual path of relating to God.
- C. Knowing the difference between the substance of what Jesus taught and spiritual perspectives that distort what Jesus said can make an eternal impact on our soul. Disciples within the church can be tempted to adopt a perspective that is contrary to the true message communicated by God through Jesus. What we accept as the true message of God matters and makes a significant impact on the way we live our lives. Paul begins this letter about genuine Spirit-filled living by warning the church about distortions to the gospel in Galatians 1:6-9. Throughout the book of Galatians, there is a primary focus on the nature of a healthy Christian life. Disciples learn how

¹ Recently, the church has promoted the use of Latter-Day Saint instead of Mormon. Although, it seems a number of members don’t mind still being called Mormon.

² <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/gospel?lang=eng>

to follow Jesus in a way that is empowered by the Holy Spirit, contrary to a way of following Jesus that is unprofitable.

II. New Information can be Uncomfortable

- A. In the letter of Galatians, Paul is going to describe what it means to live for God by operating in grace and the Holy Spirit. A genuine and healthy relationship with God is being explained in detail throughout the book of Galatians. More specifically, there are two foundational ways of understanding what it means to follow Jesus. One way is taught and promoted by Paul, and the other way is being taught and promoted by people who considered themselves to be attached to Jesus but were not (Gal. 2:4).³ These two approaches to following Jesus can be easily recognized all throughout the history of the church, and they still exist in the present.
- B. Let's begin by looking at what the disciples in the churches in Galatia are experiencing:
 - ⁷ which is not *just* another *account*; but there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. (Gal. 1:7)
- C. Disciples in the churches in a geographical area are being made uneasy ("there are some who are disturbing you", v. 7).⁴ To be disturbed is to be like the ocean during a storm, all churned up and unsettled. There is a lack of calm due to an uproar. These disciples are experiencing a mental, emotional, and spiritual reaction to an alternate message claiming to be Christian that is different from the message provided by Paul. The mental effect is these disciples being thrown into a state of mental confusion.⁵ What was once clear is now confusing. These disciples, after being exposed to a different message, are now questioning what is true. Disciples who don't know the word of God tend to believe any teaching or doctrine that sounds reasonable as they are carried along in different directions (Eph. 4:14). These immature disciples are being tossed around doctrinally by a new teaching that they think might be true. These disciples are not yet convinced of and grounded in the truth of the word of God—they aren't doctrinally stable because they haven't yet formed their own personal convictions on different topics.
- D. This mental anguish naturally leads to emotional discomfort. Individuals in these churches have lost their peace and stability. They are feeling anxious and uncomfortable. The peace and harmony of individuals and the community is being upended by people who are causing trouble.⁶ These disciples are not only perplexed, they are feeling fearful.⁷ The internal emotional calm and peace that these disciples had has been interrupted because they now think the way they are relating to God according to Paul's gospel is wrong. Even though these

³ Paul continually distinguishes between the church congregation and those who are teaching the distorted gospel (Gal. 1:6-7, 4:17, 5:7-12, 6:12-13). Thomas R. Schreiner, [Galatians](#), Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 48.

⁴ The most convincing view is that the apostle Paul is writing to the churches in southern Galatia that He planted during his first missionary journey including Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (Acts chapters 13-14). Thomas R. Schreiner, [Galatians](#), Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 30.

⁵ R. Alan Cole, [Galatians: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 9, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 77.

⁶ David A. deSilva, [The Letter to the Galatians](#), ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 127.

⁷ Timothy George, [Galatians](#), vol. 30, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 94.

disciples have accepted and trust in Jesus, they are becoming convinced belief in Jesus is not enough to be right with God.

- E. These disturbed disciples are being negatively impacted spiritually (Gal. 5:7). Their spiritual progress and passion is being negatively impacted by the current situation. Their views and feelings toward God may be getting hurt as well. They are moving toward a spiritually harmful condition that will negatively impact the way they relate to God. These immature disciples were on the right path and were making some spiritual progress, but now their forward momentum has been interrupted by the new teaching they were hearing. The new teaching that is contrary to Paul's message is producing spiritually harmful effects on these disciples and their Christian life.
- F. The situation in these churches is descriptively captured by Timothy George:
 - Whenever there is a genuine moving of God's Spirit or a major advance in missionary outreach, we can be sure that Satan and his minions will have a vested interest in casting doubts, sowing discord, and wreaking havoc.⁸
- G. Paul had ministry fruitfulness as the Holy Spirit moved to change hearts as the gospel was preached, new churches were planted, and the kingdom of God was moving forward through the missionary efforts of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13-14). On the heels of this fruitfulness came attacks from the enemy. New and immature disciples are frequently the enemy's target because they are generally weaker prey and easier to upset. Confusion and emotional discomfort are the tactics Satan uses to disrupt disciples moving forward in the Christian life.
- H. This agitation is causing these disciples to consider walking away from the gospel taught by Jesus and Paul. From God's divine perspective, these disciples would also be walking away from God ("deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ", v. 6). We must understand the connection between the message of God and a person's relationship to God. To accept a different message than the gospel communicated by the apostle Paul is to abandon God. To accept any other message other than the one communicated by Jesus is to reject God. This is why Paul is taking the confusion happening in the church so seriously. A salvation determining issue is being addressed. If these disciples turn to this different "gospel," they will be disconnected from Jesus (Gal. 5:4).
- I. We are reminded here of how fragile inexperienced and uninformed disciples are.⁹ They can be easily upset and thrown into turmoil. They are much quicker to walk away. Their commitment to sound doctrine found in the word of God is weak. Their minds can be easily convinced of unbiblical ideas, and they can quickly adopt those ideas and move toward them. This is why Paul is writing with such urgency. It is why He is addressing this situation immediately.
- J. If you are an inexperienced and uninformed disciple, it is good to recognize this tendency about yourself and to build a relationship with a more mature disciple that can help guide and teach you accurate Biblical perspectives. There is much spiritual safety in having a "spiritual parent" watching over your life. We don't leave young children to fend for themselves in the world. So, too, we should not leave young "spiritual children" to fend for themselves in the spiritual world.

⁸ Timothy George, [Galatians](#), vol. 30, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 90.

⁹ Timothy George, [Galatians](#), vol. 30, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 90.

- K. If you are a mature disciple who knows the Bible, is there a “spiritual child” you can connect with to help protect and teach? Disciples who have been following Jesus for some time and who know what the Bible teaches on various topics should be helping teach new and immature disciples what the word of God says. Mature disciples educate immature disciples to know what God says and how to implement what God says into their lives. It is going to be generally true that young disciples who do not know the word of God very well will, if left to themselves and their own thoughts, believe teachings that are contrary to the perspective of God. This is why mature disciples spiritually investing in less mature disciples is so important.

III. Watch Out for Distortions of the Gospel

- A. As disciples who are following the message of Jesus, it is critical that we learn to discern the difference between the true message of God and counterfeit versions of the true message. There is a true gospel, and at the same time, there are many false gospels. The apostle Paul is warning these churches of the spiritual danger they are facing as they are encountering a distortion of the message of Jesus. The message communicated by Paul is not of the same quality as the message being communicated by those who are agitating them. Not all spiritual truth claims are of equal value or quality.
- B. Here is the warning given to the churches:
- ⁶ I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel, ⁷ which is not *just* another *account*; but there are some who are disturbing 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 what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! (Gal. 1:6-8)
- C. According to God’s perspective being communicated through Paul, there is only one true gospel (“the gospel of Christ”, v. 7). Jesus is both the content and the communicator of the true gospel of God.¹⁰ The true gospel is about Jesus and taught by Jesus. This gospel was learned from Jesus and communicated by the apostles at the command of Jesus (Heb. 2:3-4, Mk. 3:14, Ac. 1:8, 4:19-20, 10:42, 1 Cor. 1:17). The gospel being referred to is summarized and presented in its basic elements in several places in other writings by Paul (Rom. 1:1-4, 5:1-10, 10:9-10, 1 Cor. 15:3-4). It is a gospel that contains the theme of the grace of God (“called you by the grace of Christ”, v. 6).¹¹
- D. This true gospel is different from another so called “gospel” that is being taught in the Galatian churches (“for a different gospel”, v. 6).¹² Paul begins by calling this alternate message a gospel (“a different gospel”, v. 6) but then clarifies his point—it isn’t really another gospel since there is only one gospel (“which is not just another account”, v. 7 and “distort the gospel of Christ”, v. 7). The contrast is between the true gospel that teaches receiving grace through faith in Jesus and the distorted gospel that requires human effort to earn God’s favor through keeping the

¹⁰ Lee Martin McDonald, [“Galatians,”](#) in *The Bible Knowledge Background Commentary: Acts–Philemon*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Craig A. Bubeck, First Edition (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2004), 474.

¹¹ Galatians 1:15, 2:21, 5:4

¹² Ronald Y. K. Fung, [The Epistle to the Galatians](#), The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 45, Robert K. Rapa, [“Galatians,”](#) in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Romans–Galatians (Revised Edition)*, ed. Tremper Longman III & Garland, David E., vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 565.

Law. The equation should be grace + nothing = favor with God, but this is being replaced with grace + works of law = favor with God.¹³

- E. The motto of a person who is living by law is, “I will try harder.” Notice the self-reliance that is contrary to the way of God. The motto of a person who is living by grace and the Holy Spirit is, “Jesus, I need you to change me.” Notice the Jesus reliance which is at the core of the way of God. These mottos result in completely different outlooks and modes of operating in life. Living in law assumes we can please God by our own effort. Living in the Spirit assumes we can’t please God without God working in us to change us. This is the main difference between law and grace. This is the difference between the true gospel and distortions of the true gospel.
- F. The most likely description of this distorted, contrary, and therefore false gospel is summarized:
¹ Some men came down from Judea and *began* teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” (Ac. 15:1)
- G. The focus on requiring Jewish practices as a necessary element of being right with God comports with what Paul says elsewhere in Galatians regarding the false so-called gospel (Gal. 2:3-5, 3:11, 5:2-6, 6:12-13). Specific religious rituals needed to be performed to be right with God and experience His favor. Males getting circumcised and the requirement to follow the judicial Law given through Moses is needed to be saved.¹⁴ On the view of the teachers who are upsetting the churches, Paul’s gospel was not enough. While both agreed that belief in Jesus was necessary, the distorted gospel requires human effort through Jewish practices to earn God’s favor and blessing.¹⁵ Jesus’ death and resurrection wasn’t enough to make a person fully right with God according to this other gospel, which isn’t really a gospel at all. Jesus’ death and resurrection on the cross wasn’t enough to fully forgive and cleanse a person fully. Other elements of salvation were added onto belief in Jesus—circumcision and obeying the Law.¹⁶
- H. The distortion is one where the core message of Christianity is changed or turned into something different as it takes on new characteristics.¹⁷ The message is reversed by twisting it into the opposite.¹⁸ The necessity of performing some action or religious ritual to be made right with God (theologically called justification) is a distorted gospel.¹⁹ No attempt or action done to make ourselves right with or acceptable to God is consistent with grace. Admitting our own personal helplessness to fix ourselves is necessary to receive the grace and forgiveness offered by Jesus.

¹³ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 343.

¹⁴ The Law is all the 613 commands taught in the writings of Moses that communicate the requirements of God (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy).

¹⁵ R. Alan Cole, [*Galatians: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 9, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 77.

¹⁶ Timothy George, [*Galatians*](#), vol. 30, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 92.

¹⁷ Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Galatians 1:6 “distort”

¹⁸ Timothy George, [*Galatians*](#), vol. 30, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 95.

¹⁹ It should also be noted that a further distortion of the gospel that needs to be avoided on the other extreme end of grace is that once saved we are free to do whatever we want, we are even free to continue to do wrong. One distortion eliminates grace by saying grace isn’t enough, the other distortion says grace is everything so there are no moral requirements to follow in the Christian life. Both are distortions of the true gospel. The true gospel says grace is enough to be right with God but grace also changes who we are when we receive it.

- I. This other “gospel” is incompatible and inconsistent with the true gospel (“a gospel contrary to what we have preached”, v. 8). The pieces of the gospel of Jesus can’t be put into the same picture as the gospel being taught the “false brothers” (Gal. 2:4). When the true gospel is placed side by side with the distorted gospel, the differences become obvious. A different message is being communicated. This is why discernment and knowledge of Biblical truth is so important—they prevent disciples from believing unbiblical (and consequently harmful) ideas.
- J. In this spiritual lesson, we see the importance and necessity of having our passion and energy for God connected to an accurate knowledge of the truth. Disciples need to be Biblically informed to be spiritually healthy. A desire to please God and having good motivations is not enough. Just because a person is passionate about God or has a desire to please Him doesn’t mean everything being done accomplishes that goal. Passion for God, if it is to be directed properly, must be grounded in knowledge (Rm. 10:2). The role of the mind and how people think is an important element of the Christian life and a right pursuit of God. People can’t pursue God any way they want, we must do it the way Jesus teaches.

IV. Be Assured there is Only One Gospel

- A. Paul doesn’t just warn these disciples about the spiritual danger being faced, He also motivates them to stay on the right path instead of following the temptation to abandon Jesus by accepting a different message. Living by any other so-called gospel other than the one given by Jesus has serious negative consequences. These disciples are being provided reasons to have confidence in the message they have already accepted.
- B. Here is how Paul encourages these disciples and churches to remain confident in the message they have already heard:
 - ⁸ But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! ⁹ As we have said before, even now I say again: if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed! (Gal. 1:8-9)
- C. The most important observation here is to notice where the strongest point of emphasis is placed: the content of the message, not the authority or credentials of the messenger (“But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached”, v. 8).²⁰ The content of what a person teaches is the most consideration to determine if any messenger claiming to speak for God is the genuine article or a false imitation. Paul, who communicated the true message of God, says that if he communicates a message that is contrary to the message taught by Jesus, He deserves to be condemned by God! The person communicating the message is clearly not the deciding factor in determining true verse false teaching.
- D. This emphasis can help us identify true teachers of the message of God from false teachers. False teachers have a normal tendency to emphasize themselves as the messenger and their own authority. It is the messenger that gives credibility to the message. False teachers promote their message primarily or exclusively through their own education, credentials, experiences

²⁰ Richard N. Longenecker, [Galatians](#), vol. 41, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1990), 16–17.

with God, position or status, accomplishments, or personal authority. False teachers convince others to listen to them and take their message seriously because of WHO THEY ARE. For true communicators of the message of God, the order is completely reversed. While the messenger still matters, the most critical issue is whether the messenger is accurately communicating the right content in their message. The accuracy and content of the message qualifies the messenger. True teachers convince others to listen to them and take their message seriously because of WHAT GOD SAID. However closely the message of the messenger compares to the message of Jesus, and the word of God is what is emphasized for credibility. The authority is not inherent in the messenger but in the message. True messengers of God speak using God's authority, not their own.

- E. The Galatian disciples are being reassured and encouraged to have confidence in the fact that there is one and only one true gospel. There is one true message communicated by God explaining how people can be made right with Him through acceptance of and trust in Jesus. Any other message that is communicated as a means of being made right by God is false. These disciples who are agitated and question their beliefs are reassured that they have believed the true message of God, and the other message that they are hearing is strongly condemned by God. These disciples can be confident that they are on God's side through the gospel given to Paul directly by Jesus.
- F. Anyone who teaches or believes in a false gospel will remain under the wrath and punishment of God ("he is to be accursed", vv. 8 and 9). Getting the core message of Christianity wrong has serious consequences. It is no small matter to get the details of the gospel wrong—even if the differences appear small. The spiritual canyon between any other gospel (whether that be the "gospel" of Islam or the "gospel" of Mormonism) and the gospel as taught by Jesus is like the Grand Canyon. One gospel leads to eternal life, while the other to eternal death.
- G. If you have accepted Jesus for the person He claimed to be—the one of a kind King of the world who has a unique relationship with God the Father and the only person who can provide forgiveness for the wrongs we've done—you have the only true perspective on how to be right with God. You are standing on a rock-solid, firm foundation that you will never have to be ashamed of. When you stand before God, you will be vindicated as having been right about God. No matter how many people think you are wrong or how much pressure people put on you to make you feel bad for standing with Jesus, you are on the right team.
- H. While you may not be aware of all the wonderful reasons why Jesus is trustworthy and the message of the Bible is the message of God, you have still landed in the right position. Be confident and assured that you are accepted by God. Don't listen to your doubts. Don't start thinking God doesn't care for you when life gets difficult. Cease questioning your salvation when your struggle with sin gets intense. Your acceptance from God, your justification, does not depend on the actions you perform but on your attitude toward Jesus. If you have a genuine affection for Jesus, you are loved by God the Father. You are safe and secure in the favor of God. You've accepted the true message of God.

V. Conclusion

- A. The core message of Christianity that we accept will greatly influence the way we relate to God. Getting the right message leads to a life lived in grace, the power of the Holy Spirit, and freedom. Getting the message wrong leads to a life of heartbreak and spiritual slavery as we feel obligated to perform enough actions to earn God’s approval.
- B. Disciples who understand grace live with a sense of freedom and confidence knowing they belong to Jesus and they are loved by God. Make sure you are fully convinced of and confident in the core message of Christianity—the gospel. Immerse yourself in the words of Jesus, knowing how He taught people to be right with God. If you want to do this, we have a thirteen-week Bible study to help you do this called *Jesus on Getting Right with God*. This resource can be obtained through the church office. If you would like someone to go through this study with you, just ask! We’ll be happy to partner you with someone who can help walk you through this material.