

## Sermon Series on Galatians – Series C

Week 1 (May 29) Galatians 1:1-12 Paul's Passion for the Gospel

*Paul's letter starts off with strong words for the Galatians. Why is Paul so fierce? The very Gospel is at stake. He cannot give an inch here or all is lost.*

Week 2 (June 5) Galatians 1:11-24 "Set apart before I was born"

*For Paul this is no theoretical discussion but one which is intensely personal. Paul's own story bears out that God's love is graciously shown to sinner.*

Week 3 (June 12) Galatians 2:15-21; 3:10-14 It is Christ who lives in me!

*God's love for sinners is no emotion which is felt from a safe distance. Jesus is found inside the Christian – rendering him or her holy. God is not afraid of our sins, but he enters and transforms us.*

Week 4 (June 19) Galatians 3:23-4:7 Heirs of the Promise

*Paul speaks of our inheritance in Christ – and what it means to be an heir even now. We may toil beside the slaves in the field, but our hearts, minds, and obedience to God are completely different for what Christ has done.*

Week 5 (June 26) Galatians 5:1, 13-25 The True Freedom

*Ours is not only a freedom from the burden, but also a freedom to obey and serve our saving God. The fruits of the Spirit are real and they inform our Christian lives. Paul really meant it when he said Christ lives in us!*

Week 6 (July 3) Galatians 6:1-10, 14-18 Boasting in the Cross

*Paul speaks to the community which lives under that cross and is marked by the forgiveness of Christ. He describes us too.*

The preacher who takes up Galatians as a sermon series, is handling the very heart of the Christian faith. This is the one letter in which Paul angrily addresses a congregation. Corinthian immorality and factionalism does anger him like this. Thessalonian heresy about the resurrection and the end of the world evokes a gentle teaching letter. The Colossians are dabbling in some sort of Jewish mysticism or Gnosticism and Paul praises their faith and love. Not here. Paul skips the prayer and thanksgiving at the beginning of this letter to launch into a fierce defense of the Gospel and all that it means.

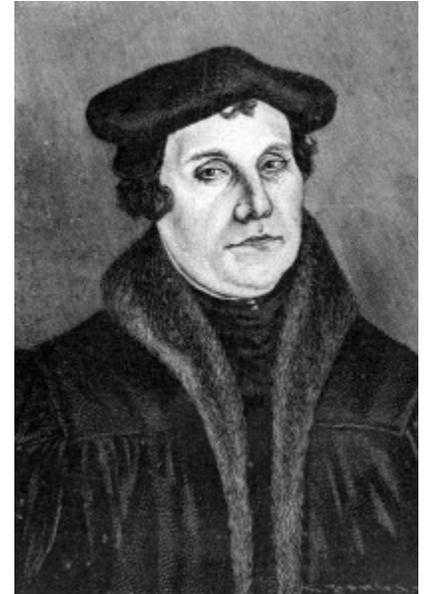
What is the importance of Galatians for the Church today?

1. Paul's passion is often lacking in our parishes today. We come to Church and yawn. Paul is not yawning here – he is fiercely staking out a position and his witness of Christ in this letter.
2. Freedom – Americans are frequently using the term, but we understand freedom as a liberty to do something without constraint. But Paul redefines this word for us. We are free from a burden to keep the law in order to gain God's favor but also free to serve God. Paul will not posit freedom as an absolute – he believes we are always enslaved. The free Christian is enslaved to Christ. This series falls in a perfect time of the year for an American audience. We start on

Memorial Day and conclude on the Fourth of July weekend. The patriotic emphasis on freedom will be in the air at this point and the sermon series gives us an opportunity to recast freedom into a more Biblical understanding of freedom.

3. Definition of the Gospel – again we are quite sloppy with our language. The Law/Gospel dynamic is critically important to the reading of this book. This is not a simple thing, but a complex relationship of tension. We are simul justus et peccator.
4. Refocuses the Christian on the centrality and significance of the Gospel for the ordering of our lives, contra – legalism.

Paul's passionate letter of freedom of course also plays into our own history and heritage. It was lecturing on Galatians and Romans which seems to have been the occasion for Martin Luther to rearrange his whole theology around the cross and grace. As we come to the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation we would do well to read Luther on Galatians. His classic commentary is wordy but worth it. If you want to pick up a text to accompany that, I would recommend Carl Trueman's *Luther on the Christian Life* recently published by Crossway Books. It is both engaging and very interestingly told by a Reformed theologian. As an evangelical, Trueman applies Luther's words to an American Protestant scene far more authentically than any Lutheran could do without sounding like a bitter screed. He really takes some of his fellow evangelicals to task based on Luther's ideas.



Before I send you to the modern commentators, however, we need to address something. If you read around in Pauline theology and commentaries on Galatians in particular you will discover that there are some folks out there who don't like Luther's reading of Galatians. They actually don't like Augustine's reading of Galatians and Romans and since Luther was a thoroughgoing Augustinian and far more widely read today than Augustine in many circles, they focus on Luther. If you run into the term "New Perspective on Paul" and its corollary, "Old Perspective on Paul," you have encountered this debate.

The New Perspective asserts that Augustine and all who followed him made a mistake when reading Paul, particularly when they talked about the works of the Law against which Paul so strenuously wrote in his letters. Augustine, and even more so Luther, understood those works of the Law to be the attempt by the human being to earn his or her way to heaven. To do the works of the Law was to buy into works righteousness. In the last several decades many NT scholars have come to realize that the Jewish people never really thought that way. They understood that God had chosen them graciously. Just consider the opening to the 10 commandments. God did not expect them to keep the commandments before he brought them up from Egypt (Exodus 20:1-2). The Jewish opponents of Paul, in the eyes of the New Perspective, thought that in order to keep the gracious love of God one had to do certain acts which marked one out as a chosen person of God: Circumcision, Sabbath observance, Kosher laws, etc. It is not that these things earned God's love, but to deliberately ignore or break these was to turn one's back on God's love and hence to lose that special relationship with God.

According to the New Perspective, and it must be noted that there is some disagreement among New Perspective proponents, when Paul opposes the Judaizers, he is not opposing people who are trying to

work their way to heaven, but opposing people who think that the cultural identifiers of Judaism are necessary to keep the gracious love of God. Paul, in opposing them, is asserting that God loves bacon-eating, uncircumcised gentiles as much as he loves the kosher crowd in the synagogue. It is much more about the inclusion of the gentiles than it is about whether we earn our way to heaven. Paul says that the real marker of the relationship with God we call faith is the love of the Christian community members for one another, not whether we eat certain foods or observe the Sabbath or have had a minor surgical procedure performed on us. Those are things of the old covenant, not the new.

There is much to commend the New Perspective. It seems to be rooted in a much more nuanced and sensitive understanding of Judaism than either Augustine or Luther had. It also has several points where it adheres to the text of Paul's letters quite closely. At other points, however, it struggles to make sense of some of what Paul says. One can read passages such as Romans 5-8 or Galatians 3 - 4 in the New Perspective and they make sense, but they also can be seen as making more sense in the old, Augustinian reading.

My personal take on this is that the academics have made a distinction without a great deal of difference. If you believe God only loves you if you are circumcised and abstain from ham you are positing a reactive God. This God is conditioning his love on something you do, whether you understand that love to be conditioned prior to God loving you or after God loving you seems somewhat immaterial to me. In both cases you have said that God only loves some folks who do something right.

What is more, I believe both Augustine and Luther both write and speak out of an insight into fallen human nature which is both congruent with what Paul writes and which is pastorally very necessary. We do like to be "theologians of Glory" to use Luther's phrase. We like to be in control and manipulate God, either by earning our way to heaven or by seizing control of our future by keep our grasp firmly on the love of God. But Luther correctly saw that the Christian life is one in which we daily die and the Holy Spirit graciously calls, gather, enlightens, and sanctifies us. Old and New Perspectives are materially the same in this regard. Paul, as Luther and Augustine rightly saw, that the old man clings tightly to us and manifests in a variety of ways, but at the root of all of these ways we are seeking control. The Jewish opponent of Paul in the first century sought to control his relationship with God by dictating who could lay claim to being one of God's beloved. We would do the same today in a variety of different ways. After all we don't have a lot of folks who are insisting on circumcision or kosher diets.

If you are inspired by this to read a little more, here are some reading resources which are not exceedingly technical. While I normally like the material of N. T. Wright, he is almost unhinged on this subject I cannot recommend him, particularly his book *Justification*.

Das, Andrew J. *Galatians*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 2014. *I have to admit that I have not had enough time to work through this one. Das is well respected in Paul studies and an able writer which bodes well for this commentary.*

Dunn, James. *The New Perspective on Paul*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007. *James Dunn is one of the founders of the New Perspective movement and has written on the subject for many years. He is credited with coining the term "New Perspective." He has also written a synthesized treatment of Paul's theology but it is over 800 pages long! This is a collection of essays which I find to be more digestible.*

---- *The Epistle to the Galatians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011 (reprint edition). *If you want to see the New perspective applied to the interpretation of Galatians, Dunn is a good choice. He wrote the commentary some years ago but Baker has reprinted it.*

Gray, Patrick. *Opening Paul's Letters: A Readers Guide to Genre and Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012. *Gray offers up a good introduction to reading all of Paul's letters and helps the reader understand what it means to be reading a real first century letter and not a theological treatise. His insights into Paul's use of rhetoric were very helpful for my students.*

Kirk, Daniel. *Jesus I have loved, but Paul?* Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012. *In this text Kirk attempts to defend Paul from the many who would cast Paul as a woman-hating, Jesus-distorting, mistake. Kirk portrays Paul as a faithful follower of Jesus who accurately and energetically promotes the Jesus movement in the first century.*

Luther, Martin. *Commentary on Galatians*. Trans.: Theodore Graebner. Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2012. *This is not the complete text, but is a condensed version of Luther's commentary. Luther's original runs over 800 pages and frankly Luther can be a little verbose at times. The other benefit of this edition is that it is free on Kindle at Amazon. Of course the downside is that this translation is pretty old and the language will be a little stilted. If you are looking to get this, be aware that Amazon has several versions of Graebner's condensation of Luther on their website at various price points. There are several other editions by other translators as well. Be aware that if you get the CPH version of Luther's works, translated by Pelikan, the fifth and sixth chapters of Luther's commentary are in a second volume.*

Moo, Douglas. *Galatians*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013. *Douglas Moo is probably the strongest proponent of the Old Perspective on Paul which he is more inclined to call the right perspective on Paul. If you want to read a scholar who disagrees with the New Perspective types, he is the guy. He is a very well respected NT scholar and professor at Wheaton College.*