

No Other Gospel

Sermon—January 17-18, 1998

Rich Nathan

The Book of Galatians Series

Galatians 1:1-10

This evening [morning] I am going to begin a new series from the apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians. It has been some time since I have taught a book and this is one of my favorite little books in the New Testament. The great Reformer, Martin Luther, also loved the book of Galatians. He found it a source of strength for his own life and an armory of weapons for his reforming work. In fact, Luther loved the book of Galatians so much he called it "My Katie Von Bora." Katie Von Bora was Luther's own wife. Martin Luther had a romantic attachment, a fascination, a friendship with and a deep commitment to it. He said that he had a relationship with the book of Galatians like he had with his own wife. He was in love with it – pretty high praise. The theme of the book as we are going to find over and over again, is Freedom. Freedom from a performance treadmill, to be acceptable to God. Freedom from having to live according to the opinions of others. Freedom from the power of our addictions. We're going to see that becoming free is a major theme of this book.

Now, whenever I begin a book study I like to offer you just a drop of background concerning the book that we are going to look at. This letter to the Galatians may be the earliest of Paul's writings in the New Testament written in about 48 AD. You may be interested to know, as well, that this is one of the few letters of Paul in the New Testament that even the most liberal scholars in the world don't challenge as coming from the pen of the apostle Paul. It has been said of Galatians that if the apostle Paul didn't write Galatians, then the apostle Paul wrote nothing. It has his style, his doctrine, even at the end of it, his signature.

So, what is the history behind this letter? Paul was a missionary and a church planter. Along with Barnabas and several other Christian men, Paul left his home church in Antioch, which would have been in the extreme southeastern corner of modern-day Turkey. They went west into south Turkey and preached Christianity to utterly pagan cities with names such as Iconium and Lystra and Derbe, the story of which is told in Acts 14. And then Paul and his companions headed back to their home church in Antioch. While they were there, right before they were to go to Jerusalem for a major church conference, Paul gets a report that teachers were going into the churches that he had just planted and they were basically disrupting the entire work that Paul had spent his blood and sweat, literally his blood, to establish. He was stoned and beaten; driven out of another city by a mob. They were going into these brand new churches with a two-fold message: One, they were saying, "You shouldn't listen to the apostle Paul. Paul isn't a real apostle. Paul's authority isn't at the level of the original Twelve, especially the big cheeses of the church—Peter, James and John." What they were doing was separating these new believers from their spiritual

father, the apostle Paul. They were sowing into the new believers' minds some questions about Paul and his authority. It was all an attempt to drive a wedge between Paul and his spiritual children. So the first of these teachers's attack was against Paul, himself, and his authority to teach.

The second prong of their attack was against Paul's message. Paul's message was that salvation comes through the death of Christ alone plus nothing. And these false teachers were coming into the church and we are going to learn a lot about their message, but they were basically saying that you needed to add something to the death of Christ in order to be saved. Christ, alone, was not enough. We have to supplement the death of Christ.

Paul's experience in planting churches, leaving and then getting attacked by false teachers is a story that has been sadly repeated over and over again in the history of the Christian church. It is as modern as a recent e-mail that I just received from Russia asking for urgent prayer. A Vineyard pastor planted five churches in the former Soviet Union. He was the spiritual father of hundreds of new believers. They were like tender little plants needing to be protected and nurtured. He went away and in his absence several false teachers entered the churches and upset the new believers there. They told them that what they had been taught by this Vineyard pastor was false. They filled their minds with doubts and distortions. Eventually, several of the churches split. This person who had given years of his life to ministry in Russia was suddenly watching the whole foundation of his work being destroyed away by false teachers.

Today we are going to read a defense of Paul's apostleship and his message. He wrote this letter to shore up the foundation of these fledgling churches – so that his labor wouldn't be in vain. I have called today's message, "No Other Gospel." Let's pray.

So Paul is defending his apostleship throughout this letter and he is defending his apostolic message. Let's begin, then, reading in Galatians 1:1.

Galatians 1:1-10:

"Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the brothers with me, To the churches in Galatia:"

Right out of the starting gate Paul declares his authority in unmistakable terms. He says, "Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father..." What is an apostle? An apostle is a title that Jesus used for his special representatives, his envoys, and his agents. From the wider company of followers of Christ, Jesus chose twelve and he named the apostles and sent them out to preach, to cast out demons, and to heal. They were personally chosen by Jesus, called by Jesus himself and authorized to teach authoritatively in his name. It is real clear from the New Testament that "apostles" were special representatives of Christ and that the word apostle is not a general term for a Christian or even a great Christian leader. The word apostle is not like pastor or brother or elder. It was reserved for a few select people.

And it builds upon a Jewish practice of having an agent or an envoy act as a representative in your place. In Judaism, in New Testament times there was something called a "shaliach". A shaliach is an agent. There was an old saying

that a man's shaliach, a man's agent, is as the man himself. People appointed these agents to enter into marriages for him. A man would hire an agent and send the agent to the girl's house to negotiate a marriage contract with the girl's parents. That agent carried the full authority of the man himself to do all the negotiations. You would pray that your agent would do a good job and not go to the wrong house or to the wrong girl. People would even hire agents to do religious rituals for them and to conduct business. People related to the shaliach as if he was the person who sent them. That is why Jesus said to the apostles, "He who receives you, receives me."

So when we are talking about apostles, we are talking about people who are special representatives of the Lord Jesus Christ, Himself. Called by the Lord and authorized to speak in His name. This is different than the modern pastor who is ordained by a local church or ordained by a bishop or a group of elders, depending on the denomination. The ordination of the apostle is from the hands of Jesus himself. The apostle is not appointed by a local church. The apostle is appointed by God.

That is why Paul says that he is an apostle sent not from men nor by man but by Jesus Christ and God the Father. See, the apostle's authority is in no way subject to the church. It doesn't matter what the church thinks, how the church feels. He wasn't sent by the church or called by the church or confirmed or ordained by the church. The apostle's authority is like unto the authority of Jesus Christ himself. As Ephesians 2 says, "The church is built on the apostles. The apostles themselves are not built on the church."

What qualifies someone to be an apostle? Along with the calling by Jesus Christ, this ordination by Jesus and the entrusting of divine authority, the New Testament is very clear that no one can be an apostle without seeing Jesus physically resurrected from the dead. It was the unique role of the apostles to be eyewitnesses to the physical resurrection of Christ. In other words, if you haven't seen Christ physically resurrected, you can't be an apostle. And if you are taking notes, you may want to jot down 1 Corinthians 9:1, where Paul writes, "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" And Acts 1:22 where when they were waiting on God to appoint a new apostle to replace Judas and asking the Lord who the eleven remaining apostle mentioned would be; the essential qualification was that they become a witness with us of Christ's resurrection.

So there are two essential qualifications: (1) An apostle must be uniquely called and commissioned by Jesus to represent Him and speak in His name, and (2) an apostle must have seen Jesus physically resurrected from the dead.

What about modern day apostles? Are there any apostles walking around in 1998? Have there been any apostles after the 1st Century? If we mean apostle in the sense of the apostle Paul, or the original Twelve, specially commissioned people carrying the authority of Jesus Christ to give the meaning of the coming of Christ and his death, people who were eye-witnesses to the physical resurrection of Christ, the answer is no. And there have been no apostles since the 1st Century who have the authority of a Paul, Peter or James. I know that the term apostle is used loosely by many to refer to folks who are church planting missionaries. You will hear folks describe the great missionary Hudson Taylor as

the apostle to China, or the great missionary Adanirum Judson as the apostle to Burma. But they are using the term apostle in a very different way than what Paul is referring to here in Galatians 1:1. They just mean a church-planting missionary who has been very successful and is a very gifted leader.

The fact is, the apostle Paul is quite clear that while there were apostles appointed before him, like Peter, James and John, there were no apostles appointed after him. That he is the very last of Jesus' apostolic appointments. And I want you to see this because there are lots of folks running around in America today and all over the world claiming to be waiting for the recovery of the apostolic gifts. And that the church will come into its fullness when we have apostles set up again who have this authority over all the churches. I am here to tell you that there is no recovery of the office of apostleship either now or in the future. Paul was the last of Jesus' apostles. Paul says this in 1 Corinthians 15 in describing the appearances of Jesus to various people. The apostle Paul writes, "For what I received I pass on to you as a first importance that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures and that he appeared to Peter [look at his language], then to the Twelve [literally it reads, then he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers at the same time, most of whom were still living, though some have fallen asleep], then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also as one abnormally or untimely born." Paul goes through a list of people that Jesus appeared to. He appeared first of all to Peter. And then he appeared to the Twelve. And then he appeared to James. And then he appeared to all the apostles. But interestingly he doesn't say, "And then he appeared to me" he deliberately chooses to limit in time Jesus' resurrection appearance. I am the very last person who has seen the physically resurrected Christ, not by way of a vision, but in the same fashion that the other apostles saw him. I am the very last of Christ's specially qualified envoys."

Rich, why are you so concerned that we understand the unique role of the apostle Paul and the unique role of the apostles? Why is it so important for the Christian church in 1998 to put the apostles in a category that is utterly remarkable, never to be repeated?

Well, I think there are two reasons why we have to hold onto the unique authority and the unique commissioning of the apostles, that they are in a separate category from everyone else who followed them. The first reason is that throughout history there have been people who have come along and said that they have been specially commissioned by Jesus Christ to supplement the message of the apostles. That they are new apostles appearing on the scene to give the latest revelation of Jesus Christ, and that yes we respect Peter and Paul, but now I am the one who has come to deliver you the very latest of the revelations of Jesus. Paul specifically rejects this basic apostolic power to anyone ever coming along after him to supplement or add to his message in Galatians 1:8ff.

For example, one such man is Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon Church. He claims that on May 6, 1833 he was given a new revelation through a series of angelic visitations and a set of golden plates, which Joseph Smith

copied down and translated into the *Book of Mormon*. And this restores to Christians the true teaching of Jesus. That the New Testament we have has somewhat gotten corrupted and that God sent along this new person, this new apostle to bring us back to the church. And so we have to supplement the apostolic teaching with the *Book of Mormon*, and the Mormon's other books, *The Doctrine and Covenant* and *The Pearl of Great Price*. If people took Galatians 1:8 seriously and understood that Paul was the last of Christ's apostles, they could never become a Mormon.

The same thing is true in the creation of the Unification Church with the Revelation Sun Myung Moon, who says: Oh, yes, I accept the revelation of the Bible and the teachings given through the apostles, but God today has brought a new truth through me and a new revelation to resolve the fundamental questions of life and the universe. He claims to have ascended into heaven and have spoken with the Saints in Paradise and with Jesus. And he has brought to life heavenly secrets that were previously not revealed in the Bible. And these things were written down in Sun Myung Moon's book called *The Divine Principle*. If people took Galatians 1:8 seriously and understood that there are no apostles or supplementary revelations after Paul, they wouldn't join the Unification Church.

Similarly, Edgar Cace and Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of the Christian Science Church, claimed to be specially commissioned by God to add to the apostolic message. What we have are modern day apostles with new revelations. Any time you hear a claim like that, on its face you reject it. You say, "No. Paul was the last. There are no supplements to this book."

It is also important to hold onto the unique authority of the apostles because frankly, we in America in 1998 have no understanding of apostolic authority much less Divine authority. We live in a culture in which every opinion is subject to disagreement, debate and dialogue. There are no absolutes. There was a recent survey done of college freshmen and nearly 30% of college freshmen could not say that the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews was absolutely wrong. 30% of American college freshmen cannot say that the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews was absolutely wrong. They have been so affected by relativism that there is nothing absolutely right or wrong. The best they could say was that they didn't think the Holocaust was right. But they couldn't lay their opinion on someone else. Many politicians can't say that it is absolutely wrong to kill a 7 or 8 or 9 month old fetus by sucking its brains out in a ghastly, horrible procedure called a partial birth abortion.

We don't know what to do with a clear word from above. We don't know how to handle an absolute word that claims to be from God. We are so used to relativizing everything and dialoguing and debating.

In the Columbus Dispatch recently there was an article written about the Revelation Peter Gomes, who was a Harvard Divinity Professor and, in fact, the Chaplain at Harvard University. Reverend Gomes just recently came out as a practicing homosexual. And when asked about how he could square his practice of homosexuality with the apostle Paul's teaching against homosexual practice, Professor Gomes simply said, "I wouldn't trust the apostle Paul's views on

sexuality any more than I would trust him to predict the weather. I simply disagree with Paul.”

Unless we recapture something of the unique authority of the apostles, we are going to be teaching a religion that has nothing to do with Christianity at all and something that is simply the product of our own minds and imagination. More and more, friends, American Christianity is taught in a fashion that is far more American than it is Christianity. Paul is saying, “My message came from Jesus Christ.” Therefore, my message is authoritative. My message concerns absolute truth for God. And even to you who live in a day of radical relativism and radical pluralism, you must submit to my message in order to be saved. You can have no relationship with God, no salvation, unless you accept the message of the apostle Paul.

It is so important, friends that we begin to anchor our thinking, whether about abortion, or same sex marriages or divorce, not in the latest survey or preference poll or our own individual wants or desires or our own opinions or our own discomfort with certain things Paul might say. But that we subject ourselves to the authority of the apostle Paul, because he speaks on behalf of God. In fact, you and I are going to be judged by our loyalty and submission to the apostolic message. Do you in your behavior and anchor your thinking in this belief, or do you sometimes say, “I don’t care, I disagree, I don’t see why I should? I must object.”

We move from the messenger of the gospel to the message of the gospel in verses 3-5 where Paul writes, “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age according to the will of our God and heavenly Father to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Paul, in these couple of verses talks about the source of our salvation and gospel message. The source is grace. There may be no more important word to Christians than the word grace. Of every word in the English language, it may be that the one that you should hold nearest and dearest to your hearts is this word grace. In fact, of all the words the one that you should seek to understand, to get a handle on, that I am going to be going over and over again through this book of Galatians is this one little word called grace. Grace is God’s free and unmerited favor shown to guilty sinners who deserve only judgment. Grace is the love of God shown to the unlovely. Grace is God reaching down to bless people who are in rebellion against him. The source of our salvation is the grace of God with His undeserved favor. Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more. Grace means there is nothing we need to do to make God love us more. That God won’t love you more if you fasted and prayed for the next month. God won’t love you more if you gave away everything you owned to the poor. God won’t love you more if you leave your job and go to seminary to become a pastor or missionary, or give yourself on behalf of some righteous cause.

And grace means there is nothing we can do that can make God love us less. Think about this. Not only can we do nothing to make God love us more, but also we can do nothing to make God love us less. No amount of pornography or

racism or murder or greed or pride or adultery can ever get God to love you less than an infinitely loving God already loves you. And you might be disciplined, you might lose everything you worked for, but God loves you just the same. When we speak of grace we are saying that God loves you wholly apart from what you deserve or what you have earned or what you have forfeited.

Part of the reason why I am going through the book of Galatians is because we are all of us incurable legalists. What I mean by that is that all of us are incurably performance-based in our relationship with God and our relationship with each other. We continually believe that God loves us a little bit more when we are a little bit nicer. And he loves us a little bit less when we are a little bit meaner. All of us evaluate our standing before God on whether we prayed in the morning or sinned in the morning. We quickly lose an understanding of grace. We invariably get on a performance treadmill in which we evaluate our relationship with God based on our performance.

Let me give you a little illustration to back you away from the performance treadmill that I got from a wonderful book by Jerry Bridges called *Transforming Grace: Living Confidently in God's Unfailing Love*. Some of you have had to declare bankruptcy. Despite the fact that bankruptcy is becoming much more common in America, there are millions of people who have filed for bankruptcy, it still contains a note of shame to it. It means failure, insolvency, and the inability to pay your debts. It is not something that anyone is proud of. You don't hear boys one upping their friends saying, "Oh yeah, well maybe your dad can beat up my dad, but my dad just declared bankruptcy."

Now, bankruptcy can be used not only to talk about someone's financial state, but also their spiritual state. In fact, the apostle Paul describes all of us as being spiritually bankrupt when he says in Romans 3:10-12, "There is no one righteous not even one. There is no one who understands. No one who seeks God. All have turned away. They have together become worthless. There is no one who does good, not even one." No one righteous. No one who seeks God. No one who does good, not even one. This is spiritual bankruptcy in its most naked sense. Usually when someone declares bankruptcy they have a few assets that can be sold off to pay a little money to the creditors. But the Bible says that everything you have is worthless to God. You can't make partial payment for your debt. Even our righteous acts are like filthy rags in God's sight according to the book of Isaiah. All of us are spiritually bankrupt. We owe a debt that we can't make even partial payment on.

So salvation comes to us as a gift, an act of grace. We have to, all of us, stop trying to pay our debt before God and turn in faith to Jesus Christ for our salvation. We have to, first of all, acknowledge before God our spiritual bankruptcy.

Now, let me extend this illustration for just a moment. There are two kinds of bankruptcy that a company can declare. A company can declare a Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Under Chapter 11 the court temporarily prohibits creditors from going after the assets of a company. It gives the debtor corporation some time to get its affairs in order, to reorganize, to bring in new management. After it has

gone through reorganization, it comes out and pays off its debts. Chapter 11 bankruptcy is what you might call a temporary bankruptcy.

And then there is Chapter 7 bankruptcy, which is permanent bankruptcy. Every thing in the firm is liquidated. The firm is declared insolvent and unable to pay its debts. The firm has no future as a viable business. The company is finished. It is all over. The company closes the door and dies.

So what kind of bankruptcy do you think most people declare before God? Chapter 11 temporary bankruptcy or Chapter 7 permanent bankruptcy? A going out of business, a total liquidation? I think most people come before God with a Chapter 11 temporary spiritual bankruptcy. When folks begin the Christian life most do so out of a sense of desperate need. We can't make life work. We have hit the wall. That is what drives us to Jesus. We have a sense of need. We know we need his grace. We know we need his help. We need some relief. So we begin the Christian life with an understanding of grace. And then things begin to work out for us. We get a little nicer. We become a little more generous. Maybe a few of our problems that drove us to Jesus get solved or we see them in a whole new light. Maybe we get back on our feet. Do you know what we do? We say, "Well I guess I'm reorganized and can now go back into business on my own." We think the spiritual bankruptcy we declared which brought us to Christ was only temporary.

Christ got us in the door. He helped us when we couldn't help ourselves. But now that we are such good Christians we begin to live by our own efforts. And so regularly God allows us to fall on our faces, to embarrass ourselves by the appearance of an old sin; to lose our temper; to get caught doing something that we shouldn't be doing; to struggle over and over again with a habit. To get pressured by finances into anxiety; to get pressured by relational problems into anger, depression, bitterness or judgment. Why? Because God wants you to know, friend, that before Him you are not in temporary bankruptcy who, with a little bit of God's help, will be able to get it together and be able to take it from here. Before God, moment-by-moment, you are permanently bankrupt. You will never be anything but bankrupt, always forever dependent upon the grace of God to live. You will never be able to take it from here. You will never be able to take one step away from reliance on the grace of God and do well.

You say, "Rich, that is pretty bleak and depressing. I am always going to be bankrupt?"

Well, it is rather depressing. But on the other hand the blessing of bankruptcy is that the debtor gets to go free. The reason people enter into bankruptcy is they realize they can't pay their debts. They are hounded by creditors. And there is something liberating about coming under protection of the bankruptcy court. At the end of the process you don't owe anything. Your debts are taken care of. Remember I said Galatians is a letter about freedom. Only when you declare permanent bankruptcy can you go free.

The source of our salvation is grace. But the result of our salvation is peace. The reason most of us live with constant anxiety and turmoil is because we don't understand the whole business of declaring permanent spiritual bankruptcy and being permanently discharged from our debts before God. We say, "Well, yes, in

the past I was discharged. But in the present? In this moment I don't need to perform? I don't need to prove anything to God? I don't have to pay anything?"

The best test of whether you understand grace is whether you regularly experience peace. Peace means you have gotten off the performance treadmill. If you are jangled inside all the time, if you constantly have a feeling of exhaustion, burnout, it's because you are trying to live the Christian life but you can't. And you feel horrible about yourself, before God, you don't understand grace. You are not living in a state of permanent bankruptcy and permanent forgiveness. The source of the gospel is God's grace, his unmerited favor. The result is peace.

The content of the gospel is the death of Christ to rescue us. Paul writes, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age according to the will of God our Father."

Here is a way for you to understand grace. Think of the word grace as an acronym—G-R-A-C-E. Grace means God's Riches At Christ's Expense. Christ gave himself for us. It was simply a decision by God that when we acknowledge our spiritual bankruptcy before him to say, "okay children, you can run free." The debt that we have run up before God needs to be paid by someone. It was paid by the infinite merit of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was infinitely obedient to God. When he lived his life on earth he obeyed God to the infinite degree. Even to the point of voluntarily going to the cross. His infinite obedience in life and his shed blood in death was the price of you being discharged from your debt forever. You get off the performance treadmill because Jesus Christ once got on it. He performed perfectly. And so you have been rescued; you who have put your faith in Christ for salvation. Christianity is a rescue religion.

Quickly, Paul rebukes the church. He said, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel which is really no gospel at all." The letter to the Galatians is the only one of Paul's letters in the New Testament where he doesn't thank God for something good in the church. After Paul gives his initial greeting, he always in all of his other letters says something nice about the church that he is thankful for. Thank God for your sacrifice or your faithfulness or your hard work or your love or your evangelism. But in the case of the Galatians he says nothing good about them. He immediately rebukes them and says, "I am astonished. I am not thankful, I am shocked by your desertion, your defection."

They were turning to a different gospel, actually to a message that was no gospel at all. One that we might call the un-gospel. Their turning is not just the substitution of one idea for another or even a false idea for a true idea. It is interesting that Paul says when people move away from the grace of God; it is not just that they buy into a false philosophy, but in the realm of thoughts that their thoughts have just gotten messed up. He calls it a personal desertion. I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you. It is an act of betrayal. It is becoming a traitor, a turncoat. They are not just deserting from the message, they are deserting from God.

Do you understand that when you get on a performance treadmill, that when you believe that God loves you a little more because you are doing a little better, or God loves you a little less because you are doing a little worse, you are being a traitor, a deserter, to God and his grace. That you are a turncoat every time you get caught up in your own good works as making you acceptable before God. It's not just unwise to try to become religious to feel good about yourself. It's betrayal of loyalty to God and his grace.

And it is interesting how quick this can happen. He says: I am astonished at how quickly you are deserting the one who called you. The one thing that is apparent as we read the scriptures is how quickly people can move away from truth, from clear revelation. God shows himself to Moses and the Jewish people on Mt. Sinai and within a couple of days the Jews are gathered around a golden calf and they are worshipping an idol. It is so quick, our spiritual descent, isn't it?

It is shocking and appalling to us how quickly we move away from something that God has shown us. The Lord speaks to you about an area of your life. He gives you insight about the state of your heart and you grieve over it and repent. And then you quickly lose the truth of that insight and fall back into the same pattern again. We have a wonderful time together in church and in worship and sometimes you might feel, actually feel, the presence of God. You go out to the parking lot and get in an argument with one of your kids or your spouse. Or on the way home out of the church parking lot, someone cuts you off and you pound the steering wheel and curse at him or her.

We are astonished at how quickly we move away. This tells us of our continual need to be reminded of the grace of God. Because of our quick desertion, our quick falls; we need those things in our lives that bring to us the grace of God. Fortunately, God has not left us alone. He calls us to a deep commitment to a Christian church so we are not isolated. I have never seen any Christian do well in grace apart from a deep commitment to a local church. On our own we are all traitors.

I have never seen a Christian do well without regularly refreshing themselves with the truth of the scriptures and the grace of Christ by daily doses of the Bible and daily bathing in prayer before God. We are quick deserters. We need all the help we can get.

And we are assisted in our desertion, in our defection from the gospel by distorters of the message. Paul writes in verse 7, "Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the message of the gospel of Christ."

Who are the distorters of the message of the gospel? In Paul's day it was a group of people called the Judaizers, the ones who said that you need to add to the grace of God with your own works. In Paul's day there was a group of people who came along and we read their message in Acts 15:1, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved." These people didn't deny that you needed to believe in Jesus for salvation. They said yes you must believe in Jesus for salvation, but you must also do certain things to be saved in addition to believing in the death of Christ. The distorters of the

gospel are those who say that we have to add something to Christ and to His rescue to be acceptable to God.

The distorters of the gospel are not those who deny Jesus. They don't deny the cross. They don't deny the need to put your faith in Christ. The distorters of the gospel are always those who add to the gospel. It is always Christ and something to be acceptable before God. Christ and circumcision is what the Galatians false teachers taught. We wouldn't say that today. We might say Christ and a certain brand of politics. Charismatics and Pentecostals might say Christ and speaking in tongues. Baptists might say Christ and abstinence from alcohol or Christ and reading the King James Version of Bible only. Roman Catholics might say Christ and the Virgin Mary, or Christ and penance. The Church of Christ might say Christ and baptism.

It is the supplement to the gospel that distorts the message. That something beyond Jesus Christ rescues us from our sins. The distortion to the gospel that I am most personally concerned about infiltrating this church is the distortion that comes from modern secular therapy. Christ plus some non-biblical therapeutic counsel will save you from your sins.

Rich, what kind of therapeutic counsel are you talking about as an addition to the gospel?

The gospel message is that when you declare your permanent spiritual bankruptcy before God. God sets you free, completely free in your conscience. God sets you free and forgives you every one of your sins because of the death of His son on the cross. Modern therapy says, "Well, it is nice that God forgave you for your sins, but for you to go really free, you must, in addition, forgive yourself for your sins."

I can't tell you how many Christians have said to me, "Well, I believe God has forgiven me for my sins, but I am still in bondage and I still am not really free because I haven't forgiven myself." A horrible distortion of the gospel and one that is a defection from grace and a defection from the apostolic message.

When people say that they haven't forgiven themselves what they really are saying is several things. One, they are saying that they haven't completely realized their spiritual bankruptcy. Often when a person who can't forgive himself or herself is because they think that they should have performed better than they did. They are saying, "I can't believe I did that?" Why? You are spiritually bankrupt. Why can't you believe that you fell as far as you did? What made you think that you were a moral person or a spiritual person or a good person to begin with? You may have violated some cherished ideal, but the fact is you are spiritually bankrupt. "I can't forgive myself" can often be translated, as "I didn't recognize I was such a sinner before." "It bums me out that I am such a sinner."

The person who can't forgive himself or herself is also saying, "God's forgiveness is not enough by itself. I must add my forgiveness to that of God. Can my forgiveness free and cleanse and wash and heal better than God's forgiveness? The person who says in addition to the forgiveness won for me by Christ, "I must forgive myself" is saying my judgment is more important to me than the judgment of God.

Friends, we Christians have been seduced by the distorters of the gospel. And some of us have added a secular therapeutic technique from a self-help book, from a call-in radio show, from a therapist to the perfect, sufficient only gospel message. And so we have to be continually on our guard. It is the role of the church and the role of the pastors of the church to be continually vigilant in protecting the members of the church from those who would supplement the gospel saying that you really need to add something to forgiveness of Jesus Christ and the grace of God.

The greatest turmoil that you encounter is not from those outside, but those inside the church who distort the message. Paul pronounces a fearful word of judgment against distorters of the gospel. Every teacher ought to be trembling in their boots, every counselor, every kinship leader, every one who gives advice to another ought to read these verses with fear and trembling. Paul writes, "Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached, let him be cursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed."

Why was Paul so urgent condemning new revelation from angels, which would rule out the Mormon religion and Islam, by the way? Any revelation from any teacher, any other revelation from even himself if they contradict the gospel that he had already preached. For Paul, it was a life and death issue. There is only one way to get into heaven. The grace of God given to us at the expense of Jesus Christ. There is only one way because there is only one God. There is only one game. If you don't play this game, you don't play. There is no other door. Jesus said, "I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he shall be saved."

Paul is so worked up because he sees this as a life and death issue – eternal life and eternal death. If people get moved away from the gospel, they're forever lost. It is like someone who has cancer and a form of chemotherapy has 100% cure rate. But some quack, some charlatan, some medical fraud says to the person who has cancer, "You need to stop taking chemotherapy and come down here to Mexico where we will give you apricot pit juice and that is what will heal your cancer."

Paul was so worked up because he loves the person who has spiritual cancer and wants to see them really cured. He knows that if they leave this cure, the gospel of grace, and run off to pursue this false cure, the cancer is going to grow and grow and eventually kill them.

Rescue. Forgiveness. Salvation. Jesus Christ plus nothing achieved all for us on the cross. The apostle Paul, whose authority we must submit to, announced this message of forgiveness through Christ alone, plus nothing, to us. And now the message needs to be appropriated to us by faith. There is no other way to God. There is no other gospel than the one Paul preached. Do you believe it? Have you laid hold of it? Are you laying hold of it?