

The Gospel in Galatians 1:6-9

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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- ⁷ which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! ⁹ As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:6-9)¹

Introduction

I have quoted the above passage at length because it is such an important one. If we understood this passage better, we would hear more sermons on it. I mean, we Seventh-day Adventists would hear more sermons on it. Often these words from Paul are used against us, and we allow our opponents to take the initiative here, but I hope to show that a clearer understanding would lead to different results.

What Is the Gospel?

Paul, in one place says, "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, . . ." (1 Timothy 2:8). Paul states himself quite simply here. So what would a different gospel look like? A gospel that's different from this could be different in one of two ways. It could put something in that wasn't there to begin with, or it could take something out that was there originally and that needs to remain.

A gospel with the right starting point

"Remember Jesus Christ." Let's start with this much. What should we remember about Jesus? Going all the way back to the beginning, "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). But what is sin? If we don't understand what sin is, we won't know what it means to be delivered from it. I will let the reader look up such passages as Rom 14:23 (emphasizing faith) and 1 John 3:4 (emphasizing law), but here my point is that being delivered from sin lies at the heart of the gospel – the good news about Jesus. The bad news, after all, is that we are fallen, sinful human beings, whose sins have separated us from God. So the good news should be – and is – that Jesus "will save his people from their sins." If we were fallen and sinful and had to remain slaves to sin

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forever, with all that that implies, that would not be good news at all. So the gospel tells us we don't have to remain slaves to sin. This is something Jesus can deliver us from.

There is another gospel, however, which teaches that being delivered from sin is unnecessary. God saves us from death without reference to sin. Our sins are irrelevant – before receiving Christ, because He forgives them all, and after, because by then we're forgiven and it doesn't matter any more how we live. Or that's what some people say. This leaves out the very thing the gospel was designed to do, i.e., to save us from our sins. If we have a gospel that's so simple that it leaves out what is most important, something's missing. We don't have the whole story. It's only part of the good news. In this case what we have is, in Paul's words, "a different gospel-- which is really no gospel at all" (Gal 2:6-7). The gospel can be made too complicated, but it can also be made too simple. How can we be sure that when we hear the gospel presented we are hearing the real thing and that it hasn't changed in some way over time?

A gospel that's too complicated

What Paul was dealing with in Galatia was a gospel that had some extras added on. The gospel plus circumcision is a gospel that's too complicated. If faith is what brings us into right standing with God, and if circumcision is also what brings us into right standing with God, the two processes are competition with each other because they both claim to do the same things.

Consider for a moment what circumcision is. Circumcision is the removal of a small amount of flesh from the body. But if baptism is correctly understood – and correctly performed – it is symbolic of putting away, not just a small amount of flesh, but the whole body. It symbolizes dying to one's old way of life and rising to a new way of life in Christ. So if the entire body of flesh, with its sinful desires and practices, has been laid aside – if the old man of sin is dead and buried – what further contribution could circumcision make? Baptism does a much more thorough job of symbolizing the fact that in Christ we have left our old way of life behind. In this context circumcision is irrelevant.

Actually this comes closer to the point Paul is really making. He doesn't oppose circumcision in and of itself. He himself was circumcised "on the eighth day" (Philippians 3:5). Many babies today are circumcised for medical reasons. There is nothing wrong with this. In another passage Paul says, "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts" (1 Corinthians 7:19). What he really objected to was anything that would take the place of faith.

A gospel that's too simple

Just as it's possible to add things to the gospel that act like parasites and rob the gospel of its power, it's also possible to take things away that need to be there. We need to avoid both extremes.

There's a passage that gives the church in the last days a much-needed reality check. It deals with the time in which we live; it deals with what the gospel is and is not; and it is given for all mankind. It speaks of "the eternal gospel," i.e., the gospel that has always been the gospel and that always will be the gospel. Anything else is not genuine, but a "different gospel." Anything different from the real thing is not the real thing. So what is included in this eternal gospel? Here's the passage:

Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth-- to every nation, tribe, language and people.⁷ He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water" (Revelation 14:6-7).

The first thing this angel says is that we must fear God. Does this sound like something Paul could support? I believe so. What does it mean to fear God? Fearing God means taking Him seriously. You can't fear God and ignore Him at the same time. When we fear God that means doing what He says. Does this statement go too far? It sounds biblical to me. We should do what God says. We should not ignore Him. So far, so good.

So what does God say to do? The Bible is filled with things God says to do. This is because the whole Bible is the Word of God. God is quoted by the prophets on many occasions. (This is how we can know that a prophet is genuine.) But the only time God puts Himself on record as a Writer is in the Ten Commandments. Can we fear God and ignore the Ten Commandments? I don't know how anyone could do that, but some try.

The gospel, as commonly preached today, is a gospel from which we have removed the fear of God. It is a one-way gospel, where God does this for us, and this, and this, and we never respond. We just receive and receive and that's the extent of our relationship with Him. Well, I don't believe it like that. Responding to God adds nothing to salvation. What we're responding to the fact that He has saved us. So we need to get the sequence right. And then there's the matter of what kind of relationship with God the gospel gives us. If the original problem is that sin has separated us from God, then having a right relationship with God is important. I submit that a one-sided relationship is not a relationship. It's not healthy and when the relationship is with God, it's not biblical.

There's no question how a person is saved. We are saved by God's grace, through our faith (which He gives us), plus nothing and minus nothing. This is a given. There's no argument about such facts. But how does a saved person live? God shows us love to us through Christ and by what Jesus did for us on the cross. A saved person shows his or her love for God by doing what God says. The word for this type of response to God is obedience. There's a place for obedience in the life of every Christian. Paul says we should live by faith, but he never says we should ignore God. Actually, living by faith is the exact opposite of ignoring God.

Let us come down to cases. Does Sabbath keeping add anything to the gospel and therefore compete with the gospel? It doesn't, and why do I say so? Sabbath keeping involves rest. One cannot rest in Christ without first coming to Him. So again, we need to understand what comes first. The gospel speaks to the issue of how one comes into right standing with God. The Sabbath speaks to the issue of how a saved person lives. We can't rest in Christ without first being in Christ. But once we really *are* in Christ, it makes perfect sense to rest by faith in what He has done for us. We have the assurance that He loves us and has done everything possible to save us. This assurance gives a person rest and peace. The Sabbath is an outer sign of this inner condition in our hearts.

If Sabbath keeping is an outer sign of inner rest, what does Sabbath breaking signify? It signifies one of two things. First, it might show that we have no relationship

with Christ to rest in. This is the condition in which those who are not Christians find themselves. Alternatively, Sabbath breaking might show that, although we truly love God, we just don't have our theology together yet. Loving God means fearing God, and fearing God means obeying Him – not in some way that is forced and external, but from our hearts. It means doing what God says (we can't obey God without doing what He says) and doing it gladly, because we love Him.

I grant that obedience can be distorted. One can perform actions that look like obedience but that don't come from the heart. When someone pretends to obey God in this way it might fool other people, but it doesn't fool God. If we obey God out of compulsion, what's going on in our hearts? In our hearts we are rebelling against Him, even if other people think we're carrying out His will. But it's never His will for people to rebel against Him and what we are in our hearts is what we really are like. Doing what God says when we don't want to do it is not obedience; it is hard spiritual drudgery. "Such religion is worth nothing."² But if we can do obedience wrong, we can also do it right – if the Holy Spirit is in our hearts making us want to obey. It is not necessary to resent God as we go through the outward motions of doing what He says. It is possible to respond to God truly from our hearts and to do (1) exactly what He says (2) because we love Him. This is not hard spiritual drudgery. It is rest and gladness. That's what the Sabbath is about.

Discussion

In my own experience, as a life-long Sabbath keeper, I have come to believe that a person hasn't kept the Sabbath until he or she has enjoyed keeping it. The Sabbath was never merely a day of rest; there was always a spiritual component. This is why when the author of Hebrews wants to say "spiritual rest" the way he says it is "Sabbath-rest" (Hebrews 4:9). I can testify that it is possible to keep the Sabbath in a way that is both spiritual and refreshing – a full twenty-four period devoted to God.

While my daughter was growing up, spending Sabbath with her and with my wife was the happiest day of my week. I was so busy every other day that I had little time to spare. But on the Sabbath I could put all that aside and do things with my family. This doesn't mean doing just anything at all. Going to a ball game doesn't qualify, because we were not the only ones involved. We were enjoying the time we had with each other, but we were also spending that time with Jesus. So we chose activities that were consistent with the fact that Jesus was our honored Guest during these hours. He is with us always, but does not claim every day for Himself. He only asks a seventh of our time and a tenth of our increase. These are reasonable requests. So the Sabbath is not just a

² "There are those who profess to serve God, while they rely upon their own efforts to obey His law, to form a right character, and secure salvation. Their hearts are not moved by any deep sense of the love of Christ, but they seek to perform the duties of the Christian life as that which God requires of them in order to gain heaven. Such religion is worth nothing. When Christ dwells in the heart, the soul will [45] be so filled with His love, with the joy of communion with Him, that it will cleave to Him; and in the contemplation of Him, self will be forgotten. Love to Christ will be the spring of action" (Ellen White, *Steps to Christ*, pp. 44-45).

day off to spend in whatever way we like, but a spiritual time to spend with our Creator (see John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:15-17; Hebrews 1:1-3).³

This concept takes us all the way back to first principles. In the beginning God spent six days making all things and then rested the seventh day. This does not mean He was tired, and it doesn't mean He did nothing. It means He put all His busy activity aside – His work of creating – so He could spend that time with Adam and Eve.

I've been a father long enough to have some insight into this verse. If I know anything about the way God thinks toward us, He spent that first Sabbath taking Adam and Eve on a tour of the beautiful garden He had made for them. When we keep the Sabbath now, this is the pattern we should follow. In the morning we should worship God with fellow believers, studying the things He has said. In the afternoon we should get out into nature and enjoy seeing the beautiful things He has made. I like to do this with my own family plus a few friends.

Another thing I've always enjoyed doing on Sabbath afternoons is visiting those who can't get out and come to church, or those who are too infirm to get out and go anywhere. I raised my daughter to love doing music for elderly people, and we both do this now whenever possible, even though we can no longer do our music together, because she is married now and living in another state. But wherever we are, this is something we both still enjoy doing. People don't have to busy themselves doing selfish things in order to be happy. If selfish things are all we do, that's a sure guarantee that we won't be happy. On the Sabbath we should find our joy in the Lord. He wants to be part of what we do and wants us to be part of His program for other people as well.

Conclusion

The gospel Paul preached was neither too complicated nor too simple. It had no room for circumcision – this is the really big issue that Paul deals with throughout his letter to the churches in Galatia – but it did have room for the fear of God. The bottom line is, we can take seriously what Paul says while also taking seriously what God says. We do not need to choose between the two because they are saying the same thing.

When Paul says "law" in the book of Galatians, he uses that term in its fullest sense. We can't achieve right standing with God by obeying the law not to murder any more than we can achieve it by obeying the law about circumcision. But circumcision was the main thing Paul had in mind as he wrote. It made him angry that people would allow circumcision to compete with faith. Anything that competes with faith is wrong. Actually Paul says this in so many words in another passage. He says, "everything that does not come from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23). John says it another way. He says, "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4).

³ In regard to Colossians 1:15 ("the firstborn over all creation"), notice the connection between this verse and the one following. Verse 16 starts with the word, "For." Why is this? "For" sounds like an explanation. So whatever vs. 15 means, vs. 16 explains it. What is the explanation? "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (vss. 16-17). So the explanation of vs. 15 is that Christ created all things, is before all things, and that in Him all things hold together.

Notice what these two men have just said. If something doesn't accord with faith, it is sin. That's Paul. If something doesn't accord with law, it is sin. That's John. Are both right, or do we have to choose between them? Is obeying God consistent with faith (according to Paul), or consistent with law (according to John)? It is consistent with both. The Holy Spirit led both men to write what they did. So what does this tell us about the relationship between law and faith? It tells me that law is consistent with faith. One can't believe without obeying, or obey without believing. The two go together.

Consider one other passage. There are three angels in Revelation 14, bearing three related messages. We quoted the first angel earlier. When the third angel finishes speaking he says: "This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus" (Revelation 14:12). What does it mean to obey God's commandments? And more specifically, what does it mean to do this in the context of worshiping God as our Creator – the One who made our world in six days and rested the seventh? Is there a commandment that speaks of resting on the seventh day? There is.

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

It's pretty clear what obeying God means in this context. It means resting on the seventh day. But my point here is that, whatever it means, obeying God is consistent with remaining faithful to Jesus. The angel does not say, the saints who obey God *or* remain faithful to Jesus. He says, "the saints who obey God *and* remain faithful to Jesus" (emphasis added). We do not have to disobey God in order to remain faithful to Jesus. Disobeying God is the opposite of remaining faithful to Jesus, because as Jesus Himself says, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). That does not mean they are identical. (Jesus prayed to His Father while He was on earth.) But it does mean they were in perfect agreement. So when we honor the one, we honor the other.

The best way to honor God is to believe what He says and then do it. Believing God is part of having faith in God. Paul says nothing to deny this. He wasn't saying faith is inconsistent with obedience; he was saying faith can be inconsistent with circumcision. What Paul says in Galatians 1:6-9 was both exactly right and extremely important. One must have faith to achieve right standing with God; one must also have faith in order to rest in what He has done for us. When we keep the Sabbath from our hearts, this is the type of relationship with God that it symbolizes.