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Relationship, Not Religion
Galatians 1:1-5
October 5th, 2014, Jeff Germs

We are starting our new series through Paul's epistle to the churches of Galatia. This book is all about how to break free of the legalistic elder brother paradigm that we looked at from our series on the *Parable of the Two Lost Sons*. Now, this is not an easy task. If you grew up in the church and were continually taught that you didn't measure up unless you reached a certain standard of holiness that someone else imposed on you, to shake that paradigm is going to take an act of the will and surrendering all that you were previously ever taught about living as a Christian. The good news is that that is what the entire book of Galatians is about.

Galatians is such an important foundational book. It is life changing. If we let the Spirit use it we will be changed and freed from a lifetime of wrong thinking. I preached through this letter at another church where I was pastor and about two thirds of the way through the study an elderly lady in her 80s came up to me after one of the sermons and told me that she had grown up in the church and for the first time in her life she felt free. She went to her neighbours that same week and shared the Gospel with them. It was the first time in her 85 years that she had ever shared her faith with anyone. And the reason she had never shared her faith before this was because, to her, it really didn't sound like good news at all. She had no compelling message to tell until she was freed from the bondage of the law. She was a changed woman from that time on. That is what the Scripture will do for you if you allow the Spirit to change you.

Before we get going on it I want to give you a few pointers to help you get the most out of the study. The **first** thing you should always do when starting a new book study is read through the book a few times in one sitting so you have an idea of the big picture of the letter. The context is very important and you can't understand the context of a verse if you haven't read the whole book. So, the more you read it the better understanding you will have.

Secondly, as we go through this study we will not be able to cover absolutely everything in the book. We are going to find the main themes. Sometimes, in an effort to be thorough there is a tendency to pick a passage apart so much that you actually miss the point of the passage. The goal is to find out what Paul was writing about to the Galatian churches and then ask ourselves, "What does that mean for me right now where I live in 2014 in Campbell River, BC?"

And **thirdly**, we don't have all the information. There is a lot of distance between us and the churches in the province of Galatia of the first century. We are removed **historically** by about 2000 years. We are removed **culturally**. And we are removed **linguistically**. We are going to do our best to uncover the context, and the meaning in light of context, but there are times when we will have to make the best guess possible with all the information we have at our disposal. It's sort of like listening to one side of a phone conversation. You think you know what they are talking about because you can hear the person that is in the room with you, but you can't hear what the person on the other end of the line is talking about. You don't have all the information. And one can make some bad assumptions based on a little bit of information.

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When we read Galatians we are hearing Paul's side of the conversation as he writes to the Galatians. We cannot hear the Galatian Christians. There are some problems in the church that Paul is addressing and in order to understand those problems we need to understand the context as best we can, **culturally, historically, linguistically, literarily, and of course, biblically**, in light of the whole of Scripture.

In order to do that there are some hermeneutical principles that we must follow. **Hermeneutics is the science biblical interpretation.**

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How many of you have ever been to a Bible study that goes something like this. A passage is read, and then everyone takes turns saying what it means to them. "To me it means this." "To me it means that." And everyone has their chance to say what they think it means, which is not necessarily a bad thing, but there is no movement to understand what the writer of the text actually meant when writing to the original audience. It is sometimes reduced to the blind leading the blind and the person with the strongest opinion wins.

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When you study the Bible it's very important that you first understand that the original author had something to say to the original recipient of the letter. That's the first thing we should try to understand. There is only one meaning to each text. In the case of the letter to the Galatians, Paul, a real live person in the first century, was writing about real issues that were important to the Galatian churches, which were made up of real live people. Our first job is to find out what those things were.

Now, the danger in doing this is that the Bible can become to us just an archaic dusty piece of literature that is totally irrelevant to us in the twenty-first century. We could get so bogged down in trying to understand the original meaning that we totally miss what God wants to say to us through it.

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Our task then is two-fold: We, first, need to ensure that we remain faithful to the original text, and second, we need to bring the text into our contemporary situation, because it is as powerfully relevant today as it was two millennia ago. So, we are in essence seeking to understand two cultures at all times, the culture to which it was originally written and our own culture. What did it mean to them? And in light of that, what does it mean to me?

So, with all that background, let's take a look at Galatians.

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Galatians 1:1–5 (ESV)

¹ Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— ²and all the brothers who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

So, first of all, it's obvious who wrote the letter. The first verse tells us that it was written by the Apostle Paul. Paul, as most of you know met the resurrected Jesus while on his way to persecute the church. His name was Saul at that time. He was an enemy of the church.

We're going to look more at Paul before he came to meet Christ and his conversion experience in a couple weeks, but for now just know that Paul is a changed man from what he was before he met Jesus. He was once an enemy of Jesus, and now he said he has been called by the same Jesus that he persecuted.

Paul strongly asserts his apostleship here. Everything Paul says in this letter is in response to a problem that was happening in the Galatian churches. It doesn't take very long as you read the letter to discover that Paul is angry. He is ticked off. The question is, why?

There were some teachers, called Judaizers who were coming into the churches there teaching that Christ-followers, and more specifically, Gentile (or non-Jewish) Christians must also follow some of the Old Testament laws, such as circumcision and some of the dietary laws in order to be saved. In other words they had to become Jews as well as believe in Jesus.

These teachers had nothing against Jesus. As a matter of fact, they believed that he was the Messiah, but they taught that aside from believing that Jesus died for your sins you had to do certain religious things. They were false teachers. **This is the main reason Paul wrote this letter.**

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These teachers were accusing Paul of diluting the Christian message by making it more palatable to Gentiles. Paul writes the letter to show them that in fact it is they who are diluting the message of the Gospel by adding to it.

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The message of the Gospel is "Jesus." Jesus plus nothing. Jesus plus anything else is not just a different twist on the Gospel, it is a different gospel, and no gospel at all, Paul says.

The word "*Gospel*" actually means good news. It's an Anglo word that comes from the Greek word, *euangalion*. In the days of the Roman Empire, after the Roman army won a victory, the emperor would send messengers throughout the Empire proclaiming celebrating the victory. They were taking the *euangalion*, or the good news of victory to the Roman Empire.

The good news of the Bible is that God, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, has made a way for us to have a relationship with God and spend eternity with him in heaven. He offers a free gift of grace. It's not something we can earn. It is completely and unequivocally free gift of grace. That's good news.

Now, the reason Paul was justifiably angry was because the Judaizers were twisting the Gospel by adding to it. The Judaizers said, "Yes, that's true, Jesus made the way, but you also need to be circumcised, and do some other religious things." They weighed new believers down with heavy burdens that were impossible for them to bear. Now, judge for yourselves. Does that sound at all like good news?

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So, Paul immediately asserts his authority over these false teachers by saying that **he is an apostle**, or a special messenger of Jesus Christ, not by the popular vote of the people, but by God. The same God that raised Jesus from the dead appointed Paul as an apostle. And, again, we'll look closer at that in a couple weeks.

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Next, Paul says that he is addressing the letter to the "**churches in Galatia**". Paul and Barnabas had completed their first missionary journey. By the way, if you want to get some of the background on the controversy that Paul is addressing in Galatians and what happened leading up to the writing of this letter you can read [Acts 13-15](#). Paul and Barnabas and some of his other companions visited Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. These were all cities in the province of Galatia, which is modern day Turkey. Most of the Christians in the churches there would have been Gentiles (non-Jews). They would have been relatively new Christ-followers who would be vulnerable and easily swayed by false teachers.

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Paul goes on to say,

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

In other words, he starts off right away submitting his thesis statement. Grace, and peace comes from God through Jesus. Salvation is a gift from God. Grace, by definition is "unmerited favor." God gifts us with salvation, not based on anything we can do to earn it. We are saved by grace through faith in the finished work of Jesus on the cross. If we try to add anything to the equation we are preaching a different gospel that is not very good news at all. Jesus plus nothing.

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The key verse in Galatians has to be 5:1.

Galatians 5:1 (ESV)

¹For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

The Judaizers were trying to get the Galatian Christ-followers to submit to the old law. Jesus came to set us free. He was the fulfillment of the law, and yet, even in twenty first century Canada we somehow find comfort in falling back into the old ways of the law.

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We need to make something perfectly clear. When we talk about the Christian faith we are not talking about religion. Religion is slavery to a set of creeds, doctrines, and rules. **Religion is man's way of trying to appease an angry god.** That is a false idea of God. The God of the Bible is a god who pursues us.

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Psalm 23:6 (NLT)

⁶ Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever.

God pursues **us** with his love. That is quite a different picture than an angry God that has to be appeased by doing all sorts of religious rituals.

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Look at what Paul says.

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

This is what God is doing for us. He gave himself for us. That was his will and his desire. He is the giver and we are the receivers. He is the rescuer. We are the rescued. He is the initiator and we are the responders -- always. We too often get it backwards and we live our lives desperately wondering if we have done enough so that he'll be happy with us. That is religion. And it is not good news at all. God wants much more than that. He wants us -- completely surrendered to him. He wants relationship -- intimacy.

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The God of the Bible is a God who is deeply in love with the people he created.

John 3:16–17 (ESV)

¹⁶For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

We like to turn things around because for some strange reason we are comforted by rules and ritual, maybe because it's something tangible. "Do this and don't do that" makes us feel good because they are things that we can check off our list. It gives us control.

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I prayed today. Check.
I read my Bible. Check.
I confessed my sins. Check.
I went to church. Check.
I gave money to the church. Check.
I went to Growth Group. Check.

All of these things are good to do, but when we reduce them to things that need to be checked off a list so we can feel good about ourselves and be accepted by God, or feel guilt and shame if we don't do them then they have become religious acts and God is not at all pleased.

David wrote this Psalm after being confronted by prophet Nathan about his sin against Bathsheba and Uriah.

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Psalm 51:16–17 (ESV)

16For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. 17The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

That's what God wants from us. And we need to ask the Spirit of Jesus to purge us of our self-motivated efforts to gain God's favour.

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When we reduce our faith to religion and a set of dos and don'ts we make ourselves the main characters in the story instead of God. God is always the subject. We are always the object of his affection. God is always the main character.

I want you to notice something in the first few verses of Galatians. Notice how God is always the subject.

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1. Paul is made an apostle **by** God.
2. Jesus is raised from the dead **by** God.
3. We are delivered from the present evil age **by** God.

It is all by God and for God. And yet how often do we make it about us and for us. We are the main characters in the story, we think. I am a gift to God instead of the other way around.

Now, the main religious rituals that Paul addresses in this letter were circumcision and celebrating special days. The false teachers were putting pressure on the Gentile Christians to do these things if they wanted to be saved. They had a Jesus plus something religion.

We can do some similar things in our lives too. We can get so used to doing things a certain way and it becomes tradition and then it becomes sacred to us when it is not really all that important. It could be the way we dress for church, the way we pray, the order of service that we use in our worship, how we do communion, or any other thing that is outside the Bible, but we deem it essential.

For example, there was a church that I was well acquainted with that had very strict guidelines for their worship service. They were to use hymn books only for their singing. No power point, or overheads. They couldn't use drums, or certain other instruments in their service. The person leading had to stand behind the pulpit and direct like a choir director. And it couldn't be a woman. And he had to wear a suit. On the front of their bulletin was written in large print for all people to see, "We do not raise our hands or clap."

Let me ask you. Where is the good news in all of that? None of those prescriptions are found in the Bible. They are all man-made. And yet they had become sacred to this group of well meaning people. They thought, "If we don't do it this very specific way, it's not worship."

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God wants something much more than religion. He desires a soft, heart that is ready and open to change. More than anything, he wants us to spend time with him developing our relationship.

One of the dangers in this kind of religious attitude is that we develop an “us and them mentality”. That was one the main issues in the Galatian churches. We develop a certain way of doing things, and we do it for so long and then think that our way is best and if others aren’t doing it our way we judge them.

When I was growing up, and you may have experienced this too, the church that my family was a part of, for the most part, was quite legalistic. There were certain things that “real Christians” didn’t do. And if we saw others doing them we thought, “O, I guess they’re not Christians.” There was a long list of rules. They actually had a very large rule book that members were required to follow. Things that were outside the Bible. It was extra stuff.

Don’t use playing cards. Don’t go to movies. Don’t dance. Don’t smoke. Don’t drink. Women can’t wear pants. They can’t cut their hair. They can’t wear make-up or jewelry. And our so-called faith became all about managing our behaviour. Does that sound like good news to you?

We can look at some of these things and guess how the rules came about, but to make them religious law is to go beyond the biblical intention and misses the point.

There are some movies that we should not watch because they are pornographic. But, not all movies are bad. There is some kind of dirty dancing that is just plain sexual and we should not be involved in sexual immorality, Paul said, but not all dancing is wrong.

Smoking is not a wise thing to do because it is bad for us, but how many other things do we do that are equally bad, like sitting around eating junk food and playing video games all day.

Getting drunk is a sin. The Bible is very clear about that because we are to be controlled only by the Holy Spirit, but having a drink is not a sin. Jesus drank wine with his disciples at the last supper.

Women should dress modestly so that they don’t tempt us weak-minded men, but that doesn’t mean that wearing pants is wrong.

Can you see how we can make some things into religious truth that the Bible does not teach? And then we use them to judge and control other people and we decide who is in and who is out. That is religion and it has nothing to do with God’s intention for us as his people. And it is not the Gospel of Jesus. There are certain things that are better for us to avoid because they are damaging to, either our relationship with God, or with others. But, if we avoid them because they are against our religion we totally miss the point.

As we look at the letter to the Galatians the Spirit of Jesus is going to be sticking his probe into our hearts to see what is really there. Now is our chance to take a good hard and honest look at what the Gospel really is. We need to make sure that we are not making it into something that it is not.

Let's all make sure that we are ready to hear and respond to him.

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Isaiah 29:13(NLT)

And so the Lord says, “These people say they are mine. They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And their worship of me is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote.



**Galatians: Learning to Live in the Freedom of Christ
Relationship, Not Religion
Galatians 1:1-5
Week of October 5th, 2014**

Objective of this study: To uncover the big picture of Galatians.

Worship (5 – 10 minutes)

1. Spend five minutes in silent prayer asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
2. After the five minutes of silence have someone interrupt the silence and read **Psalm 33** meditatively to the group. (After each phrase, or paragraph if it's a long passage, pause and let the Lord speak to you before reading the next.)
3. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Welcome (5 – 10 minutes)

How are you feeling about digging into Galatians?

Word (20 - 30 minutes)

Today for this introductory study we are going to keep it simple. The goal is to get a big picture view of Galatians and God's heart for us through it.

1. What stood out from the sermon?
2. Read Acts 13-15 in order to understand the context into which Galatians was written.
3. Read the entire book of Galatians taking note of major themes. Once the reading is complete discuss the themes you found. Did anything surprise you?

Work (30 - 40 minutes)

1. What are you asking God to show you during the Galatians series, and why?
2. After everyone has shared, break into pairs and pray for each other for what they are asking God to show them.

PRAYER TIME/HOMEWORK

Read Galatians again at least once more in one sitting.