

"No Other Gospel"

Galatians 1:1-10

June 2, 2013

2nd Sunday After Pentecost

For many people in our world today, prescription medicine is a way of life. Some of you take that occasional pill when you are sick. Others take a fistful of pills every day to maintain good health. Suppose, however, that you thought the medicine wasn't working or wasn't working good enough and you (or someone else) began tinkering with it by adding other medicines or mixing it with other drugs in the hope that the medicine would work more effectively or powerfully. Would you do such a thing? Many people today probably would. They are not content to simply trust the doctor's prescription. They feel that they have to do something to make the medicine work better.

But doing that sort of thing leads you down a potentially dangerous path. You run the risk of, at best, doing nothing to help the medicine do its work and, at worst, you run the risk of making the disease worse by adding things that hinder the medicine. You may even cause death if the things that you add to the medicine are unsafe themselves. Now, if you knew *that*, you would never do such a thing, would you?

You might not do that with regard to your medicine and physical health, but many people will do just such a thing with regard to God and their spiritual health. Ever since Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, contrary to God's will, because they thought they knew better, mankind has had the notion that we have a better idea than God does regarding establishing and maintaining a relationship with Him. Because sin has broken our relationship with God, we have a natural distrustfulness of God and the way He works. Like people who don't trust medicine to work because it doesn't work the way they think it should, many people don't want to trust the simple and effective way that God builds and maintains a relationship with people. And, like people who want to "improve" medicine by adding things to it, so people feel the need to add something of themselves and their efforts to the process of building a relationship with God.

This is not a new problem. It is exactly the same problem that Paul was dealing with in our text. Paul had been sent by Jesus Christ to preach the Gospel -- the good news that God accepted ALL people as His through faith in Jesus. For some early Christians, that was fine for the Jewish people as long as they followed all the Laws of Moses, but not for the Gentiles. They felt that trusting in Jesus alone was not enough, especially for the Gentiles. They felt that something more needed to be added. They felt that, in order to become good Christians, the Gentiles had to first become good Jews and observe all the Jewish rites and rituals. A group of these people, called Judaizers, had traveled to the churches in Galatia that Paul had established and were preaching that Gentiles could not be saved only because of God's grace and only by faith, but that they had to be circumcised in order to be accepted by God. They evidently even accused Paul of watering down the requirements to become a Christian in order to be popular with the people. Trusting Jesus and His means for saving them was not enough. *They* had to add something.

That idea is still around today. There are some within the Christian church who do not believe that God's grace -- His undeserved love -- is enough bring us back into a relationship with Him and save us for all eternity. Like some people who dismiss the use of some of tried and true medicines because they didn't seem to work the way they would like them to, some Christians today dismiss God's tried and true methods for bringing His grace, establishing faith, and starting a relationship. People don't think they work. The Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion are thought not to be anything that God does for us or ways by which God gives us His blessings, but merely something that we do for God to honor Him because He has commanded them to be done or in order to show our commitment to Him. The Word of God is seen as information about the Gospel, but not something that does anything for us, except maybe showing us Ten Easy Principles for the Victorious Christian Life.

Many people today say that the Word of God and His Sacraments are not effective enough or not glitzy enough. Like some people today who would like to add something to medicines to help the

curative powers of the drug, people today want to add something to God's ways to help our relationship with Him. People may say, "You've been saved by God's grace alone through Jesus' death and resurrection." But then they add, "But now you must make a decision to accept that....You must invite Jesus into your heart...You must decide to follow Jesus....you must live the Christian life" Notice the adding there. God saves you...BUT..you must do something. *You* must accept. *You* must decide. *You* must follow. *You* must obey.

Is this merely a minor theological point or a matter of differing terminology that is being nitpicked about? Paul didn't think so. Usually, when Paul wrote his letters to the churches, he began by greeting them and praising them for some aspect of their faith or Christian life. The letter to the Galatians is unique in that, after greeting the people, Paul is very strenuous in his criticism of them. He writes, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you [the Judaizers] and want to distort the gospel of Christ." Notice what Paul says about these Judaizers and their message. They may have been very sincere, very nice, very religious people who intended only the best for these people. Yet Paul says that they are distorting the gospel of Christ and that their message -- their "gospel" is no gospel at all.

The same is true today. There are many people today who purport to share the Gospel and what Christ has done. They may be very sincere, very nice, and very religious people who only mean well. Yet a message that requires you to add something of your own effort -- a decision for Christ, opening your heart for Christ, deciding to follow Christ, an obedient Christian life -- as a prerequisite for the forgiveness of sins and acceptance by God, then it is a "gospel" that is really no gospel at all. Whenever you add ANYTHING to the work of Christ, it ceases to be Good News. Good News is what Christ has done for you. To say that you have to add something to what Christ has done now becomes what you have to do. And, when a message is about what you have to do, it is bad news -- for how will you know if you have done what is required of you or if you have done enough?

Paul is very explicit as to what should be done regarding such false "gospels". He doesn't say that these are trivial religious differences or that we should just agree to disagree. They must be rejected in no uncertain terms, no matter *who* is promoting them. He says, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed (that is, condemned to hell)." This problem had evidently come up before because Paul goes on to say, "As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed."

Why is he so strong about this? Remember what I said about people mixing impurities in along with pure medicine so that they would like it better. Such a mixed medicine could result in increased illness or even death because of those impurities. In the same way, any message that seeks to combine Christ's work with our response is likewise impure. Depending upon yourself or your efforts in any way can prevent the reception of forgiveness and lead to eternal death. So, Paul says if anyone is spreading that kind of message, even if she is the nicest person, the most powerful preacher, or even an angel, that person should be eternally condemned. For such a message that he or she proclaims will lead other people on the way to hell.

This is very strong talk. Such strong negative talk can cause us to miss the truly Good News that Paul proclaims, which the Scripture proclaims, and which I attempt to proclaim every week, namely, that in terms of becoming right with God, having your sins forgiven, having a personal relationship with him, and a glorious life in heaven awaiting after this life of weakness and trouble, God has done it all. Paul said it before he broke into his criticism. He greeted them by saying, "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 our God and Father, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen."

Grace - undeserved love - is given to you by God the Father and peace is the result. Why? Because your sins are forgiven. His anger with you is over. A new relationship with you has begun.

How? It has nothing to do with anything that you have done or given. But, because the Lord Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins by dying on the cross, we have all these blessings and are at peace with God. By His resurrection from the dead, you are saved from this present evil age and are given the assurance of eternal life.

It doesn't matter who you are. In Paul's day, it didn't matter whether a person was Jew or Gentile. Today, it doesn't matter if you are a life-long church member or someone who wandered in off the street. It doesn't matter what you have done -- whether you have been a pious and faithful person all your life, an average sinner, or even a flagrant and horrible sinner. Jesus did everything to save you and all people from sin, the devil's power, and eternal death. None of the good that you have done could help and all of the evil that you've done has been forgiven.

You receive the benefits of all that Jesus Christ has done merely by trusting in His actions, not yours or anything that you add to His work. You become "justified" - right with God - by faith, not by any kind of obedience on your part. Paul says later in on Galatians, "[We] know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified." (Gal. 2:16)

And even that faith is a gift to you from God. It is not something you have to decide upon or come up with. The book of Ephesians says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast." Through His Word, God not only informs you of Christ's work, He creates faith in you to receive the benefits of that work. The water of Holy Baptism not only symbolizes spiritual cleansing, but is God's way to actually cleanse your sins away and create faith. The bread and wine of Holy Communion are not merely memorials to Jesus' death, but are actually His true body and true blood to convey the forgiveness of sins which that body and blood obtained on the cross. Granted, on the surface, none

of these things seem exciting or extraordinary. They seem rather plain. Yet they are effective because God has promised to work through them. And what God promises, He does.

So, don't be led astray by those who may be sincere, may be religious, may be very persuasive, and yet say there is something required of you to be saved or to be a "real" Christian. This is not only not true, but dangerous to your spiritual life. Instead, carefully evaluate everything you hear from preachers, on Christian radio and TV, and from Christian authors and musicians. This is not being negative or unchristian. This is what God tells us to do. The Scripture says, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1)

How do you "test the spirits"? By what standard do you measure them? It is not by their sincerity or persuasiveness. There is only one standard by which truth is measured and with which we can evaluate various teachings: the Word of God. Do not take religious claims at face value, but see if what is taught agrees with the Bible. The people in the city of Berea did just that when Paul preached the Gospel to them. The Book of Acts says, "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." (Acts 17:11) You should do the same. Examine the Scriptures to see if what is taught and preached is true. Of course, THAT may mean becoming more familiar with the Bible yourself first.

Then, live, trusting in what the Word of God promises, no matter how weak or ineffective it may *seem*. The centurion did that in the Gospel lesson for this morning. He did not need Jesus to come to his house, wave His hands, or do any sort of spectacular thing. He simply trusted Jesus' Word to have the power to do what He promised. The same is true with God's means for working in our lives. Such things as words, water, bread and wine may not seem powerful enough. You may feel the urge to add something of your own -- some decision, some religious ritual, or some act of obedience to make them complete. It's not necessary. Trust God's Word to do what He has promised and you will

receive every blessing that God has in store for you: his love, forgiveness, support during your life, and life that continues in His presence forever.

Ed McMahon and Dick Clark became famous for sending out announcements to people that say, "You may have won \$10,000,000!!!" Kids can get excited about this because they overlook the "may" and think that their family is immediately rich! However, we adults become jaded and skeptical. When anyone offers us such wealth, we doubt that we will receive such a wonderful prize and, if such a prize is truly available, we want to know what the catch is -- what *we* have to do to get the prize! Some do the same with God. God offers all people a personal relationship with Him, the means by which to obtain that relationship - the Word and Sacraments, and the blessings that flow from such a relationship and they wonder what the catch is. Don't be skeptical and wonder what *you* have to do on your part to obtain it. A "gospel" that requires your contribution, as Paul says, is no real Gospel at all. Instead, know the true Gospel: that Jesus Christ has done it all for you. God gives these blessings freely as well as the faith to receive them. Believe this by the power of the Holy Spirit and you will not have to wonder if you have these blessings. You will indeed have them all for all eternity. Amen.