

Not Man's Gospel

Proper 5/3afterPent

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Gal. 1:11-24

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last weekend we heard from Paul about the pastoral ministry, and how it was established through direct and indirect calls by God to men in particular times and places. Paul and those men, including this one, are therefore concerned with what God thinks and His approval rather than that of man and society.

At the same time, it is not the men who are the focus. Whether it is Paul or Apollos or Cephas, Bruce or Josh, or even Luther, did any of these die for your sins? No, it was only Christ Jesus our Lord who died for your sins on the cross of Calvary. All manly vessels God uses are but jars of clay. As Paul wrote in his second letter to the brothers and sisters in Corinth: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” And a few verses earlier he wrote: “Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God...For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.”

The church of God is the only place where we may find the Gospel of Jesus Christ properly taught and lived, yet this is all God’s doing. The men who are called to be preachers of the Gospel are themselves sinful human beings who have been set apart to proclaim this message. This does not mean that they no longer sin or make mistakes. They do, which only demonstrates all the more the power of the Gospel of Christ Jesus that can absolve the sins of both lay people like yourselves and the men called to be pastors like me.

That’s what Paul wrote to those in Corinth. Let’s take a few minutes now and compare what Paul wrote to the Corinthians with what he wrote to his brothers and sisters in Galatia in our Epistle text.

Paul begins this section: “For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Last week our focus was on the men of the ministry—whether they were seeking man’s approval or God’s. This week we focus on the fact that the Gospel that these men proclaim is not something some human being dreamed up. The apostles saw what Jesus did. They heard what He said. And they proclaimed these things through the Holy Spirit. They did not receive stories from other people about what Jesus did—they were there. Paul, on the other hand, it seems was not present for the events of Jesus’ life. In fact, he had not even been a believer in Jesus until our Lord Christ met him on the road to Damascus.

You may already know this, just as some of those in Galatia might have already known this. But Paul brings it back to their minds because the rumors had begun circulating. Isn’t this Paul the man who had been called Saul, who ravaged the church and killed our brothers and sisters? How do we know what he has spoken is the truth of the Word of God? How do we know that this isn’t some story he has come up with to trap us? Or a story that he made up which goes against what the apostles are preaching? Or what if these words are the teaching of someone who has gone astray from the apostles?

So Paul reminds them of his account of being set apart. “I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it...But when he who had set me

apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.”

Have you ever heard the rumor that what Paul wrote was not God’s Word but his own? Or that Paul is nothing but a zealot? Or that Scripture contains God’s Word, but is not wholly His Word? Do not go after these misleading heresies. All of Scripture is God’s Word, given to the writers by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This is what you have confirmed and confessed. If you have begun to give ear to these ideas or have started believing them yourselves, repent. Repent and trust that the Word of God is just that: God’s Word.

Today, the ministry is carried on by those who have not received a direct call from God, but an indirect call through the church of God. It is carried on by jars of clay, just as Paul himself was a jar of clay, who are merely the messengers of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Because the messengers of the Gospel are no longer called directly, there are times and places where pastors are found out to be wolves in sheep’s clothing. But a couple of reminders on this topic. First, our confessions make it clear that the Sacraments distributed by one who is found to be a wolf still gave the forgiveness of sins because the Sacrament did not and does not rely on the messenger but on the Word of God to be effective. Secondly, the only way to know if what a pastor teaches is properly God’s Word is to be in the church of God hearing on a regular basis.

As we heard last week, “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.” But note that it is only when a pastor preaches or teaches a gospel contrary to what you have been taught that he is a wolf. There are some things which are in the confessions and Scriptures which are not easy to hear or to do, but are the Word of God. The only way to know which is which is to be in the church of God and to be in the Word and Confessions.

If it is not the case that your pastor is teaching a gospel contrary to what you have been taught, you should not persecute the church of God. Even Paul wrote this to the brothers and sisters in Galatia. He didn’t write “how I persecuted Jesus” but “how I persecuted the church of God.” See how much he loves and cares for the church of God now that he has been called to the faith in our Lord Christ Jesus?

And Jesus didn’t hate the church either. Despite what YouTubers and other so-called believers who claim to love Jesus but hate the church say, Jesus went to the Temple to learn—and teach the elders of the church—and He preached on Isaiah, how the passage had been fulfilled in their presence. Yes, the church is full of jars of clay and of sinners. That is how God intends it to be until He comes again to restore all of creation.

In the meantime, consider Paul one more time.

“Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, ‘He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.’ And they glorified God because of me.”

If God can—and has—taken a man bent on destroying the church of Jesus Christ and made him to be one of the most memorable members of her, how much more can He do the same for any who have fallen out of step with the church?

Through the sacrifice of Jesus' life and death on the cross, God no longer looked on Saul's sins in persecuting His church but saw a sinner in need of forgiveness. This is how God views all of us—as sinners who need a Savior. God therefore sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to die for all sins—from going along with society, to persecuting the church, to believing that only part of His Word is actually God's, to any and all sins you have done, wittingly or unwittingly, of which you are aware or unaware. God sent His Son to die for those sins so that you might have forgiveness. And God forgave Paul, too, and what is more, He gave him the mission to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But Paul did not complete this mission perfectly. He wrote in Romans how he did not do the things he wanted but far too often did those things he did not want to do; and so it is with pastors called by God today. We proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and Him crucified and risen for you. There will be times, however, if there have not been already, where I will let you down. But it is not about me. It is not about Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or Bruce, or Josh, or Luther. It is all about Jesus Christ and what He has done in giving His life for our forgiveness.

Jesus Christ has opened the door for all sinners, both laity and pastor, to come to Him for forgiveness. In the former times, the messengers of the Gospel to come were the prophets, with whom God walked and talked. In these last days, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed through the Word, which may only be found in those churches which preach the Word of God in its truth and fullness and which administer the Sacraments according to God's Will. The pastor is only the jar-of-clay-messenger, a saint and a sinner just like you. The focus is on the Gospel, which is not one which has come from men or stories, but from the first-hand witness of the apostles, and from Paul, who received the revelation from Christ Jesus Himself, about Jesus' work of forgiveness. In Jesus' Name. Amen.