

God of resurrection power and possibility, as we hear a Word from the Gospel of Galatians, open our hearts and minds to experience your grace in a more profound way that we might be continually transformed by the good news of the gospel: “for freedom Christ has set us free.” By your Spirit of grace, clothe us, form us, and sustain us, so that we may bear the fruit of Your perfect love to the glory of the resurrected Christ, in whose name we pray. May the words of my mouth and the mediations of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight; for you are our rock and redeemer. Amen.

Sermon Title: GALATIANS GOSPEL OF GRACE

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ! I realize these words sound pretty formal but it seemed fitting to greet you as Paul the Apostle greeted the Galatians. We live in a culture that thrives on performance and reward. If we study hard enough, we should get good grades. If we practice hard enough, we should win awards and trophies. If we work hard enough, we should get a promotion. It is easy to adopt this way of thinking in our spiritual lives. If our lives are good enough, we should get into heaven. If we just do more, God should be pleased. If we follow the rules, we should be better Christians. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is vital that we continually remind ourselves that the gospel is a gospel of grace. Why? Because it is easy to set aside the grace of God and live in a way that depends on us. We begin to rely on what we can do for ourselves, rather than what God can do, and has done for us through Jesus Christ. We continue to struggle with the truth that God’s love is unconditional. Often, we forget there is nothing we can do or have to do to earn it. We live less than abundant lives, thinking God is disappointed with us; that we don’t measure up.

As a result, believers end up living mediocre and passionless lives, trapped in the lie that they aren’t good enough. Instead of choosing the freedom that is ours in Christ, like the Galatian believers, we choose enslavement. Christians can make the serious mistake of believing that the gospel is reserved for salvation. The gospel is so much more than just about saving us. It is the hope that keeps us, while we wait for Jesus to return. It is what transforms us into Christ’s image. The gospel is so powerful that we need to remind ourselves of it every day so we never take it for granted. Galatians is probably the harshest of Paul’s letters. The dangerous position of the Galatian church and the critical nature of Paul’s message drove him to write frankly and sharply to this group of Christians.

For Paul, and for you and me, there is nothing more important than guarding the gospel of grace, because it is a serious offense to set aside the grace of God. Because “if righteousness came through the law, then Christ died in vain (Galatians 2:21).” So, we do not set aside the grace of God. We cling to it. We stand on it. We hope in it. We grow in it. That’s what Paul wanted for the Galatian believers, and that is what God wants for you and me. We’ve heard how God’s grace not only transforms our lives, but also cleanses and clothes us anew; God’s grace not only forms us bit by bit in Christlikeness, but it bears the fruit of the Spirit in us; God’s grace sustains us for the life-long journey of following Christ. God’s grace sustains us as we seek to live as a new creation. God’s grace sustains us as we work for the good of all and bear one another’s burdens; fervently praying together, inviting God to breakthrough in our church and in our lives.

In her book, *God Unbound: Wisdom from Galatians for the Anxious Church*, Rev. Dr. Elaine Heath, tells of Richard, a man from one of her previous churches. Richard had organized resistance to Dr. Heath, spoke disparagingly about her, and disrespected her publicly, and she summarizes, “made my life hard, all in the name of preserving tradition.” Yet, one day when she was closing a meeting with a group of church leaders with prayer requests, Richard said that he was anxious about an upcoming job review, something that could ultimately cost him his job. Heath writes, “Before I could talk myself out of it and even while a voice inside my head shouted all the ways Richard had made my life hard and all the reasons it was time he suffered and why this would be poetic justice and maybe even God wanted him to suffer, I blurted out, ‘Would you like us to anoint you with oil and pray?’” She continues, “Those words surely came from God and not from my offended self.” Richard accepted, Dr. Heath anointed him, and the group prayed. She reflects that the compassion given her through God’s grace by the Holy Spirit remained with her. She concludes, “A small space opened in me into which God planted a tiny seed of kindness toward Richard.” God’s

grace is like that. When we open ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit in and among us, we discover, that God can change our hearts and the transform the ways we interact within our congregation.

As Paul's letter moves toward close, he offers a set of short instructions for sustaining God's grace in our lives and in our church. I think verse 10 provides a good summary of his advice: "Whenever we have the opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially those of the family of faith." Let us work for the good of all. Let's look briefly at his specific instructions.

He begins, "If anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness" (Galatians 6:1). His notion here is not one of going around, spying on each other, trying to catch each other red-handed. The Greek suggests someone who is entangled or entrapped in a habit or pattern of sin or someone whose behavior is causing them to fall away from their life in Christ. This transgression is like quicksand – the more you fight it, the more you sink in. You need help from outside the quicksand in order to escape. You need someone to intervene and help you. This instruction sounds strange to us today. We have become so enculturated with a strong notion of individuality and privacy that we are no longer willing to have someone speak truth to us. If someone we know questions or confronts us with an observation, we respond defensively and charge them with "judging us."

The early Methodist movement flourished around small groups of people who were willing to submit themselves to one another so that they could grow spiritually. In a band or class meeting, participants might hear questions about their prayer life and Bible reading, their attitudes and behaviors (for instance, there were questions around gossip, hypocrisy, arrogance, and self-indulgence), the temptations they faced, the sins they committed, how they shared their faith with at least one person, and the ways they have served their neighbors. In this way, they took seriously the charge to "watch over one another with love." During this period, Methodism flourished. It was only later, when the movement became a more settled institution with property and prestige, that these practices faded away and were replaced with something that looked more like public education.

Which would be more loving: to allow someone their privacy, to pretend there is nothing wrong, or to dismiss it by saying, "That's just the way they are" and watch them fall deeper into sin and away from Christ and perhaps disrupt the church community, or to gently call them to account and to change their behavior for the purpose of restoring them to life in Christ and in the church community? At the same time, Paul warns those who are going to seek to restore another not to become tempted with self-righteousness and judgment. No, they are called to offer one another grace in a spirit of gentleness and humility. Remember, gentleness is one of the fruit of the Spirit, and so it is possible when we are living in the Spirit. We should examine our own hearts, minds and lives, because ultimately, he writes, we will reap what we sow – either corruption or eternal life.

Paul reminds us that we are called to bear one another's burdens – whether those burdens include sins we struggle with or hardships we face in life. Doing this, he says, fulfills the law of Christ. It sounds strange to hear Paul endorse law when he's been lifting up grace, but what he means is practicing the love for our neighbors as we bear burdens together. This sharing opens us for God's grace to work in us. Many of us have experienced this personally when we have faced sickness, grief, relational issues, and so on, as we have opened ourselves up to seek prayer and encouragement from the church family. Or when we have been there to help bear someone's burden. As grace works through the Holy Spirit in us and in our community, the fruit of love is borne.

The strongest quality any Christian or congregation can display in its community is to love one another well within and beyond the walls of the church building. This is how God's sustaining grace works in and through us. Our neighborhood doesn't need more preaching or more warnings about hell, they don't need more gimmicky programs to get their attention and get them in the pew. What they need is for us humbly to be the Church, the Body of the Risen Christ, in the world, bearing their burdens with them and offering them Christ. In that way, we will be fulfilling the law of Christ and offering them God's grace that can transform, embrace, clothe, form, bear fruit, and sustain for all of life. Let the People of God respond – Amen!