

**Introduction:**

- A. Last Sunday, Easter Sunday, the *New York Times* columnist, William Kristoff, had an interview with Dr. Serene Jones, the president of Union Theological Seminary. Kristoff said this was “*the latest in my occasional series of conversations about Christianity.*” I knew that Union Theological Seminary is very liberal but literally everything Jones said was heretical. Take these quotes for example:

*Those who claim to know whether or not [the resurrection] happened are kidding themselves,” Jones said. “Crucifixion is not something that God is orchestrating from upstairs. The pervasive idea of an abusive God-father who sends his own kid to the cross so God could forgive people is nuts. For me, the cross is an enactment of our human hatred. But what happens on Easter is the triumph of love in the midst of suffering. Isn’t that reason for hope?”*

Kristoff asks, *For someone like myself who is drawn to Jesus’ teaching but doesn’t believe in the virgin birth or the physical resurrection, what am I? Am I a Christian?*

Dr. Jones answers: “*Well, you sound an awful lot like me, and I’m a Christian minister.*” 4/21/19

- B. Well, I don’t believe a single thing she said in that article, but who am I to say? She has her gospel message and we have ours. Live and let live, right? To each his own, right?
- C. Today we begin a study of Paul’s letter to the Galatian churches, churches which he started in what is now southern Turkey. Turn to **Galatians**. Paul had heard that “*some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ,*” and he was livid! Furious!

The danger was compounded because, not only were these guys perverting the gospel of Christ, they were completely dissing Paul’s authority, saying that he was just trying to please people, to make Christ’s salvation too easy and cheap. After all, they said, *who made him the boss of the gospel?!*

I imagine Paul dictating this letter—striding up and down, talking faster than his secretary could write. Fuming, pounding his fist in his hand, shouting. “*What has possessed these people!??*”

- D. These enemies of the gospel were not much like Dr. Jones. They weren’t cutting things out of the gospel. They were adding to it. **Acts 15:1**, sums up their teaching: “*Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.*” We call these people **Judaizers** because they wanted anyone who put their faith in Christ to become Jews, as it were, before they could really be saved.

From his first words, which might seem formulaic, Paul sets the record straight.

**I. THOSE WHO DELIVERED THE GOSPEL TO US HAD GOD-GIVEN CREDENTIALS AND THE GOSPEL THEY PROCLAIMED WAS CLEAR AND UNEQUIVOCAL**

- A. Paul begins this letter like other letters, but with very pointed words. He’s going to spend quite a bit of ink in the following verses defending his credentials, but there it is in a nutshell: V.1, “Paul, *an apostle* [with the same apostle’s authority as Peter or John]—*sent not from men nor by a man*, [because the Judaizers were saying that Paul was a fraud sent by other frauds who invented his so-called gospel of freedom] *but by Jesus Christ and God the Father,*

*who raised him from the dead—and all the brothers and sisters with me* [as if to say, I'm not alone in this]. *To the churches in Galatia. "an apostle—sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead."* I don't have that credential.

Neither does Dr. Jones, or anyone else we know. He spoke with what we call ***apostolic authority***.

B. Continuing: **vv.3-5**: "*Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*" The whole gospel is right there. **To be born again this is what you must believe:**

- In response to the will of God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah of Israel, "*gave himself for our sins.*"
- He did this in order "*to rescue us from the present evil age.*" Not to take us out of this world, but to take this evil world out of us, to make us free from the slavery of this age. There is no other hope of rescue from the evil in and around us.
- All this is the "*will of our God and Father,*" who wants to save prisoners of sin and Satan through the sacrifice of his Son. And that plan has worked.
- "*To whom be glory for ever.*" To deny this gospel, in all its particulars, is to rob God of his deserved glory. That is the gospel. Rest your faith in it. Add nothing. Take nothing away. Anyone who does not believe and declare those things—that gospel is a fraud. Dr. Jones may call herself a Christian minister, but she is a fraud.

Then, without any niceties at all, without any words of commendation or love for the Galatians, Paul comes out swinging: vv.6-10...

## II. THE GOSPEL MESSAGE ABSOLUTELY CANNOT BE MODIFIED IN ANY WAY, UPON PENALTY OF GOD'S CURSE!

- A. Remember, so far as we know, these Judaizers were really only requiring one extra thing, one addition to faith: circumcision, the mark of God's covenant with the Jews. But requiring that added something the Jesus never mentioned to his apostles, nor to Paul when Jesus appeared to him. **What this meant was that we are not saved by grace alone, but by grace plus circumcision.** It wasn't just that they wanted the physical cutting, but **they insisted a person had to be a Jew before he could be a Christian.** Paul calls that here a *perversion of the gospel of Christ*. In fact, he says it is "*no gospel at all.*" In other words, that one thing doesn't add to the gospel, it guts it. It renders the gospel powerless. **Nothing can be added to the gospel and nothing can be taken away.**
- B. It doesn't really seem like such a big deal, actually. What's the real harm? But Paul says even if he should come back again preaching something different, reject it because *this* is what the risen Lord Jesus Christ told him. Even if an angel showed up in church, shining and with thundering voice, to say anything different, reject it! Then he makes the strongest warning found anywhere in the Bible, and he repeats it verbatim a second time: "*If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse.*" That is not hyperbole. That is a sacred verdict, in effect to this day. Beware, Dr. Jones!

**Eugene Peterson** wrote, "*Our age has developed a kind of loose geniality about what people say they believe.*"

*We are especially tolerant in matters of religion... [But] Paul is not tolerant when people he loves are being told lies about God, because he knows that such lies will reduce their lives, impair the vitality of their spirits, imprison them in old guilts, and cripple them with anxieties and fears."*

[*Traveling Light*, pp.33-34]

C. We don't deal with Judaizers coming to our Bible studies and worship services, but we're not free of similar dangers, as Dr. Jones shows. **Kenny Silva**, one of our elders, wrote to me, "In a sense, the Judaizers wanted new Christians to be 'respectable' according to the Jewish ceremonial law." He said that modern people bring expectations like these to the gospel:

- *"Salvation cannot be exclusive. No one way is the right way.*
- *Any sort of moral injunction that defies personal autonomy is out of bounds.*
- *God is a very nice gentleman and He approves of whatever makes us happy."*

Kenny continued in his email, *"The tacit claim here is something like, 'You silly Christians, if you really knew what God was like you would let go of all your exclusive claims to Christ, sin, salvation, and all the rest. ... Jesus can be your guru or your homeboy, but don't you dare call Him Lord. You can believe the Gospel if you like, but make sure you modify it in the certain ways that will make you acceptable in polite company.'"*

And to that, Paul would still say, ***"If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse."***

One thing you've got to admit: Paul comes off sounding really arrogant. *If anyone—anyone!, even an angel—preaches a gospel to you different from what I preached, let them be cursed by God!*” How can he say that! His answer is in **vv.11-12**, *“I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, **I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.**”* That is the reason we are not open-minded about the gospel message. Jesus himself gave it to us this way.

### **III. THE GOSPEL MESSAGE CANNOT BE CHANGED IN ANY WAY BECAUSE IT COMES DIRECTLY FROM JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF**

- A. Paul told the story of his Damascus Road experience several times. In **Acts 26:18** he told King Agrippa what Jesus said when he appeared to Paul in that blinding light:
- “I am sending you to [the Gentiles] to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”*
- B. Next, Paul builds his case that his gospel message was authentic. **Exhibit A** was the change in his own life: vv.13-16.... In other words, *I am not imposter nor pretender. Despite all my efforts in Jewish righteousness, God himself gave **me** his grace so that Jesus Christ, God's Son, came alive **in me***. According to v.22-24, even Christians far away, in and around Jerusalem, who had never met Paul, *“heard the report: ‘This man who formerly persecuted us is not preaching thee faith he once tried to destroy.’ And they praised God because of me.”* As one old commentator put it, Paul's life was *“a signal trophy of God's grace.”* He is saying to his critics, *The gospel I preach is how Jesus transformed me from persecutor to preacher of grace.*

- C. **Exhibit B** was that he was never influenced by any human being in the expression of his gospel message. Remember what he had written up in **v.1**, “*Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father.*” Now in **vv.17-20** he says... Here Paul is saying that he was not influenced by anyone else, but only by Jesus Christ. No one ever coached him and he was never regarded as a renegade from the gospel of Christ.

**Exhibit C** happened 14 years after his conversion on a momentous and public trip back to Jerusalem. The point of the next verses is:

**IV. THE GOSPEL MESSAGE, AS REVEALED BY CHRIST TO HIS APOSTLES, INCLUDING PAUL, IS SETTLED ONCE AND FOR ALL**

- A. Paul tells the Galatians about a test case, the Gentile believer whom he brought to Jerusalem: 2:1-5... So Titus, an uncircumcised Greek Gentile and a one of Paul’s protégés, came to Jerusalem, home to the Jewish believers in Christ. And tho’ he was there among all the Jewish believers, no one required he be circumcised. A direct affront to the Judaizers.
- B. Not only was there the Titus test case, but there was the Big Meeting with the Jewish leaders of the church. Gal 2:6-10.... This issue came to a head in what we call the Jerusalem Council, described in Acts 15 where it was time to settle this question once and for all. This was the New Testament equivalent of our Continental Congress drafting the Declaration of Independence. Here’s what happened when Paul and Barnabas (and Titus) arrived they were warmly welcomed but then...

*Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles*

*must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.” [There are the Judaizers.]*

*The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, **Peter** got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the **Gentiles** might hear from **my** lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! **We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.**”*

When Paul wrote to the Galatians, he was saying, *Even though Jesus’ personal revelation of the gospel to me was authority enough, all the esteemed apostles, including me, Peter and James, all agreed that nothing should be added to the gospel. So anyone who teaches you otherwise is accursed.*

- C. I suppose that Dr. Jones thinks that her views bring a kind of freedom to “people of faith” that orthodox, evangelical beliefs do not; a healthy, life-giving open-mindedness. But it is just the opposite. Paul could just as easily have been speaking of her when he said back in v.6, *“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting **the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ** and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all.”* Dr. Jones new book, the story of her life, is entitled, *Call It Grace*. Talk about irony!



As Galatians will make clear, **to desert the gospel that invites us to live in the grace of Christ is not to find some kind of freedom, but to lose it.**

- We cannot escape the chains nor penalty of sin if we do not live in the grace of Christ alone, plus nothing.
- We cannot *have* the Holy Spirit, let alone *walk* in the Holy Spirit, if we do not live in the grace of Christ alone, plus nothing.
- We cannot show the fruit of the Holy Spirit—the Christian virtues—if we do not live in the grace of Christ alone, plus nothing.
- We cannot enjoy the bonds of love in God’s family if we do not live in the grace of Christ alone, plus nothing.