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People Pleasers or Slaves of the Messiah?

Galatians 1:1-10

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The other day the phone rang. I answered it and a stranger on the other end asked for Veronica. I passed the phone to her. I wondered who it was, but I didn't get much help from Veronica's end of the conversation. It was all "Mmhm" and "Yes" and "Okay". I had no idea who it was or what it was about. In contrast, while walking to the church I ended up following a woman who was having a very loud conversation with someone on her cell phone. I couldn't hear the other person, but I had a pretty good idea what he or she was saying based on the responses this woman was angrily yelling into her phone. Things like, "Oh! So I'm being dramatic?" and other things I probably shouldn't repeat in polite company. We do this reading between the lines when we read St. Paul's epistles. In them we have one side of a conversation and, thankfully, it's a lot more than "Mmhm" and "Yes" and "Okay". In fact, it's a lot more like "Oh! So I'm being dramatic?" And it's not too hard, if we go slowly and think about the context, to piece most of the conversation together. And so Paul begins his letter to the churches in Galatia writing, "Paul, an apostle..." And then before he's even begun, he breaks off right there, because he has to defend himself against their attacks on his apostleship. "My apostleship," he writes, "doesn't derive from human sources, nor did it come through a human being. It came through Jesus the Messiah, and God the Father who raised him from the dead." We know at the get-go that someone in Galatia is challenging Paul's credentials. I think we get an even better sense of what's going on if we jump ahead to verse 10 of Galatians 1. What Paul writes there doesn't get enough

attention. We'll come back and fill things in, but in verse 10 Paul writes to them:

Well now...does *that* sound as though I'm trying to make up to people—or to God? Or that I'm trying to curry favour with people? If I were still pleasing people, I wouldn't be a slave of the Messiah.

Three times he says the same thing: Am I trying to make up to people. Am I trying to curry favour with people? Am I trying to *please* people? So we know someone in Galatian is accusing Paul of abandoning the divine message of the gospel and, instead, preaching a merely human message that will tickle people's ears and win him friends. Anyone who knew Paul should have known better, of course, but this is how it is. Now there's actually a text—one that would have been well-known in the Jewish world of the First Century—there's a text that really sharpens the focus of this whole "people pleasing" accusation and that gives us some context for this whole dispute. It stands out, because this Greek phrase Paul uses for "people pleasing" is essentially the same as another word that pops up in the Greek version of Psalm 52:6 and in the fourth of the Psalms of Solomon. Psalms of Solomon is a little collection of eighteen psalms from the First Century B.C. and the First Century A.D., probably written by Pharisees or by people very much like the Pharisees. And there's this Greek word that isn't actually Greek—*anthropareskos*—that was made up by Greek-speaking Jews and outside of Paul's writings, shows up only in those two other texts. That fourth "Psalm of Solomon" is titled "A Psalm about the People Pleasers" and it's about people who compromised God's law, cutting corners here and there, in order to suck up to their pagan neighbours. It speaks of men who would even enter the homes of pagans and fraternise with them. That might not seem like a problem to us, but it was something faithful Jews did not do. But once you got out into the real world, out of Judaea, a lot of Jews found it hard to get by in life while completely avoiding contact and fraternisation with gentiles. In the Psalms of Solomon, the finger seems to be pointed at the corrupt Jewish rulers—

people like the Sadducees, the Hasmoneans, and the Herodians. To the faithful in Israel, these people were selling out the covenant by compromising God's law in order to ingratiate themselves with the pagans.

And, we need to be clear, people like the Pharisees weren't angry about the compromise of the people pleasers because they were legalists who were trying to earn their way into heaven through good works. There's been long tendency to read Galatians in that kind of light ever since Martin Luther. Luther read the works-righteousness of the medieval church into Paul's adversaries. And Luther was doing much what St. Augustine had done, when he read his own disputes with the heretic Pelagius into Galatians. Pelagius, too, taught a sort of works righteousness. As much as Pelagius and the medieval church did pose real problems, that sort of works righteousness wasn't at issue in these First Century disputes. The reason faithful Jews were obsessed with keeping the law was because they knew that God had chosen them, delivered them from Egypt, put them in the promised land, and called them to be holy—and that this was all for a greater purpose that would somehow involve God, one day, setting this fallen world to rights. They were trying to be, in Jesus' way of putting it, the "on earth as in heaven" people. There was a later rabbi who said that if all Israel would keep the torah for a single day, the Messiah would come. The Pharisees had very similar ideas. They also believed very firmly—because they knew the story of the Lord and Israel—that if Israel failed to keep the torah, if Israel flirted with pagans and their idolatry the way Deuteronomy warned them not to, the Messiah would *not* come and God would *not* establish his kingdom. Not only that, but the very pagans with whom Israel compromised would destroy Israel and carry the people off into exile, just as the Babylonians had done six hundred years before. I hope that helps us to understand what's behind this accusation made against Paul that he's a "people pleaser". It's not just that he's risking the salvation of some gentile believers in Galatia, but that he's putting in jeopardy the whole

destiny of Israel—and probably even the world.

In the First Century, Jews were faced with a crisis, and it was important to know who was “in” and who was “out”. Who were your allies and who were the wicked risking another disaster. The “people pleasers” were most definitely on the side of the wicked. They pretended to be on God’s side, but their compromises proved otherwise. It’s important for us to remember, too, that this was the mindset in which Paul had been steeped as a Pharisee. This is the mindset that drove him to persecute the first Christians. And now Paul is being accused of being one of those very people pleasers.

So why would anyone accuse Paul of being a people pleaser? Well, wherever Paul went, he was preaching that anyone who believed in this Jesus, who was crucified, died, and rose again...that anyone who believed that he is Israel’s Messiah and, therefore God’s King, this *faith* is the sign that that person is part of the people of God. It didn’t matter what their ethnic background was. That was it. Faith in Jesus the Messiah. Period. This is what Paul’s epistle to the Galatians is all about. Faith in Jesus the Messiah. If a gentile believed, he was as much a member of the family as a Jew who believed. He didn’t need to be circumcised or to have any of the other signs that marked out Jews—not diet or Sabbath, not rules about who you could or couldn’t eat with. But to a lot of people this marked Paul out as a people pleaser. He was compromising the law and the covenant. That made him a traitor.

I’ve begun with this, because I think it helps us understand where the focus of Galatians lies. Ever since Luther, our tendency, at least in our Protestant circles, has been to read Galatians as a letter about *how* we are saved and as a warning about the dangers of legalism or of mixing works with faith. The theology in that is right, but the perspective isn’t where it should be and I think when we put Galatians back in the proper context and get a look at it from the proper angle, what we discover

it’s really about is community—*about who the people of God are and what marks us out*. And in that light, the problem isn’t just “legalism”. Paul reminds us that what marks out the people of God is faith in Jesus the Messiah and that trying to define the community by any other means is to make it about something other than Jesus—to set up a false gospel.

So the accusation against Paul, in a nutshell, is that he’s got a gospel of human origin—that he got from someone else or that he made up himself—but a gospel that they think has been watered down to make it more palatable to the gentiles, that makes it too easy for the pagans to call themselves people of God. If we understand that, then we’ll understand these first verses. This is why Paul breaks off after writing, “Paul, an apostle...” Remember how he breaks off suddenly and adds:

(My apostleship doesn’t derive from human sources, nor did it come through a human being; it came through Jesus the Messiah, and God the Father who raised him from the dead.)

Some teachers had arrived in Galatia from Jerusalem and they’ve told the people there not to listen to Paul. He’s not a real apostle. He wasn’t there in the beginning with Jesus. He never knew Jesus. Instead, they should listen to *them*, because they got their gospel—at least so they claim—from the men who walked with Jesus for three years, real apostles like James and Peter. And so Paul reminds them that he, too, had an encounter with the risen Messiah. Paul would still be a Pharisee if it hadn’t been for that miraculous encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. And it was in that encounter that Jesus himself commissioned Paul to take this good news to the gentiles. In fact, it was seeing Jesus risen from the dead that convinced Paul of the truth of the gospel. So he goes on:

Paul, an apostle...[verse 2]and the family who are with me; to the churches in Galatia. Grace to you

and peace from God our Father and Jesus the Messiah, our Lord, who gave himself for our sins, to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of God our Father, to whom be glory to the ages of ages. Amen.

Paul...and the family who are with me. That’s the church in Antioch. First Paul stresses that his apostleship is as *from* Jesus as that of any other apostle and now he stresses the relationship that he and the church in Antioch have with these churches in Galatia. They were accusing him of being a people pleaser, of being a traitor, of being a false brother and here he reaches out with verbal arms and embraces them and reminds them that in Jesus they’re all family, all brothers and sisters.

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and Jesus the Messiah our Lord.” Paul has this amazing way of making *everything* about Jesus and the gospel. In the Greek world they greeted each other with the word *chairein*, which meant “to rejoice”, but in a letter basically just means “greetings” or “salutations”. This is, for example, how James opens his epistle. But Paul exchanges *chairein* for *charis*, the word for “grace”—from God the Father and from Jesus the Messiah—grace to you. He adds the Jewish greeting of *shalom* as well: that means “peace”. But even his word order here in his greeting sets the tone for the whole letter. It’s not grace and peace to you; it’s grace to you and then peace. Because the sum total of God’s position towards humanity is grace and this is manifest uniquely and finally in Jesus the Messiah. Everything begins with God’s grace poured out in and through Jesus. Even the peace we know and the peace we look forward to in the age to come, even that comes as a result first of God’s grace.

Paul then follows this up with a four-faceted summary of the good news. First, Jesus gave himself for our sins, (second) to rescue us from the present evil age, (third) according to the will of God our Father, (four) to whom be glory to the ages of ages. Amen.

Jesus has rescued us from the present evil age. What does that mean? Well, when the Jews looked at history, they divided it into two ages. There was the present evil age dominated by sin and death and full of pain and tears and then there was the age to come when God would fulfil his promises to set the world to rights and where his people would live in his presence forever. The present evil age is dominated by dark powers that enslave humanity through idolatry and sin. We worship idols, giving to them the glory we were created to give to God, and we rebel against him—that's sin—and our sin tightens the chains those idols have on us and on creation. While we were bound up in the present evil age, Jesus came to our rescue, writes Paul. He seems to have Isaiah's song of the suffering servant in mind as he writes this, because it's this suffering servant who represents Israel and who gives his life to break the chains the idols have cast around God's people. He dies for their sins and breaks sin's power and he leads the people in a new exodus—into the age to come. I like the way Tom Wright often reminds us that Jesus' resurrection isn't an odd or one-off event within the old world, but rather it's a launching and defining event of God's new world. Paul's gospel, his good news, is that Jesus has dealt with the sins that chained us as slaves in the dark and bloody temples of the idols, and he now leads us out into the sunlight, into the beginnings of God's new world.

Now, here's why this is so important in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Remember that for Jews, the problem with gentiles was that they were idolaters. There was one true God, the God of Israel, but the gentiles instead worshipped idols and they lived and behaved sinfully, as idolaters do. This is what made them unclean and so offensive to the Jews. This why good Jews wouldn't go into their homes or eat with them. There were some gentiles who saw the Jews and were attracted to their purity of life and joined up. But to do that, they had to be circumcised. It was a dramatic (and painful) sign that they were leaving behind the idolatrous

pagan world and becoming part of Abraham's family. But—and this is vital to understanding Galatians—Paul's point is that the gospel tells us that on the cross Jesus defeated those evil powers when he dealt with the sin that put us in their chains. This is how there can now be one family. This is how the gentiles can be welcomed into this new Israel. Again, If God has defeated the idols, the dark powers of the evil age, then the gentiles, the pagans can trust in the God of Israel and become part of Jesus the Messiah's family. And, second, because Jesus's death has dealt with sin, then those who believe in him and who become part of his family, they are no longer "sinners" or idolaters. The thing that separated Jews and gentiles has been dealt with by Jesus at the cross, and so membership in his family is by faith in him *alone* and *nothing* else. To add anything else to that—like circumcision or any of those other things that marked out the Jews—to add anything else is to detract from Jesus and to lose the gospel itself.

And then points three and four of Paul's gospel summary: The cross wasn't some accident of history. This was God's plan all along. What Jesus has done reveals the faithfulness of God and that, in turn, brings the gospel back to the glorification of God. We often make the gospel about us, but for Paul the gospel is always and only about God. God has redeemed us and in that he shows his glory and this is why we give him glory and praise. The gospel begins and ends in with God.

So that's the gospel in all its magnificent glory. We can hear the shock and the disappointment as Paul goes on in verse 6 and following, rebuking the Galatians. He writes:

I'm astonished that you are turning away so quickly from the one who called you by the grace of the Messiah, and going after another gospel—not that it is another gospel, it's just that there are some people stirring up trouble for you and wanting to pervert the gospel of the Messiah. But even if we—or an angel from heaven!—should announce a

gospel other than the one we announced to you, let such a person be accursed. I said it before and I now say it again, if anyone offers you a gospel other than the one you received, let that person be accursed.

It's not just that these churches have gone astray. That would be bad enough, but it's how quickly after he left them that they've turned away. The language suggests that Paul might be comparing his own astonishment to the astonishment of Moses at how quickly the Israelites went from praising the Lord for his miraculous deliverance at the Red Sea to creating and worshipping a golden calf. As dumbfounding as it was to Moses to find his people dancing around an idol, Paul is dumbfounded at how quickly and how easily the Galatians have been led astray to another gospel. And Paul quickly amends that, because, really, there is no other gospel. There's *the* gospel. Everything else is just is a lie.

Also, the language Paul uses to write of them "turning", that has its own shameful undertones. The word he uses is one used in the Greek Old Testament to describe desertion. In 2 Maccabees there's the poignant story of seven brothers whom Antiochus tried to force to eat pork, killing them one after the other when they refused. When it's down to the youngest of them, the text says that Antiochus tried to entice the boy to "turn from his ancestral ways". (Or course, the boy refused and became a martyr.) This is the same language Paul uses here and I think just to stress his point. This probably corresponds to what we read in Acts about "certain persons from James" who arrived in Galatia not long after Paul and Barnabas had returned from their mission there. Paul had seen these people devoted to Jesus and to the gospel, he'd seen them transformed by it, and now he's shocked that they've turned from the gospel—and so quickly and easily. If they're going to accuse him of being disloyal to Israel's traditions, he turns that accusation right back around on them. They've been disloyal to, they've deserted Jesus.

He's not into the details of their corrupted gospel yet, but he says here that they've turned from the one who called them by grace. They've turned from God himself. Paul puts the emphasis on grace as manifest in Jesus the Messiah. God's call is an act of pure grace. His sending of Jesus is a pure act of grace. The God of Israel has finally sent his Messiah as a gift of pure grace—and Paul now points his finger at these people and says—*And you've turned away from him!*

So what was their “other gospel”? We have to do more reading between the lines and it won't be fully fleshed out until we get through the rest of the letter, but the best way to look at it may be to see these new teachers not so much preaching a different Jesus, but preaching Jesus as the culmination of a *different* story. Paul was preaching Jesus as the fulfilment a story in which the God of Israel defeats the powers of sin and death to rescue his people from the present evil age, but these folks seemed to be preaching Jesus as an add-on to Jewish life as it already was—maybe Jesus as the fulfilment of some Jewish nationalist hope or agenda: maybe a message that fired up zeal against the gentiles, for example, instead of announcing to them the grace made available in Jesus.

And I think it's likely that Paul had in mind what “gospel” meant in the Roman world. To the Greeks and Romans, “gospel” was the good news announced about the accession or the birthday of Caesar. Caesar's new cult was spreading like wildfire through Asia and that included Galatia. It's not that the Christian there were in danger of worshipping Caesar. The danger was that they would embrace *torah* to save themselves from persecution for not worshipping Caesar. To refuse to worship Caesar—not to mention all the other gods—would be a bit like marching the wrong way, carrying the flag upside-down, and saying unpatriotic things in the middle of a Canada Day parade. But in that culture, not only was it disloyal, if and when calamity struck the city or the country, you'd be the one to get the blame for it, because you'd

angered the gods. But the Jews, they were uniquely exempt. The Jews would rather die than worship an idol, so after all the trouble they'd caused him, Caesar had granted them an exemption. And those first Christians started claiming that exemption for themselves. They were, after all, Jews. Even the gentile converts claimed it. But then to claim to be Jews, well there was pressure to start acting like Jews, too—and that became a problem.

And so Paul announces: Anathema! A curse. The real gospel, the true gospel is about how, in Jesus and his death and resurrection, God has dealt with sin and inaugurated a new age. That's why it's good news. But these new teachers, they're not just veering off course a little. They're completely wrong. They're telling a different story. They're not announcing the good news that God's new creation has started. No, they're just giving advice about how to live and get along in the present evil age. There's no good news there. As my New Testament prof, Gordon Fee, used to put it, they'd gone backwards from AD to BC—going from the bright sunlight of God's new day, back into the darkness of the old. No, Paul says, if any—even if an angel from heaven—proclaims anything other than the good news that I've proclaimed, let that person be accursed.

Brothers and Sisters, it's really very simple. It's about Jesus and Jesus alone and it's faith in him that defines the people of God. There is an organic relationship between faith and works such that real faith will always show itself in our lives. We know good trees because they bear good fruit. But as much as good works borne of faith mark us out, the thing that *makes*, the thing that *defines* us as the people of God is *faith in Jesus*. That's it. Nothing else. Whenever we add something else—whether it's circumcision as in Galatia or some other thing or set of rules, when we establish some ethnic or cultural criteria, when we set up some kind of personal or ecstatic or emotional experience that stands alongside Jesus—we diminish Jesus and we rob God of his glory and we lose the gospel. The

solution, I think, if we listen to Paul, is to keep our eyes focused on Jesus and the cross. Over and over Paul comes back to Jesus, declaring things like “who loved me and gave himself for me”. We need to do the same. Every week the Lord offers us a reset when he invites us to his Table. Here we recall and participate anew in those events by which Jesus the Messiah gave himself for our sins, to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of God our Father. Here we're reminded of grace, to go into another week with our eyes focused on Jesus that we might live to the glory of our gracious God and for the sake of his kingdom. Here we're reminded again that it's all about God's grace poured out in Jesus. It's not about us, it's not about who we are, it's not about what we've done or will do, it's all about and only about Jesus.

Let's pray: Heavenly Father, you have poured out your amazing grace on us, giving your Son as a sacrifice for our sin and rescuing us from the bondage of the present evil age. We should be overwhelmed by your grace and by your Son, but we confess that we too often lose our focus on him. By your grace, set our eyes again and always on Jesus, that we might perpetually be amazed by your grace, so that we are never tempted to diminish your glory by adding anything else to the gospel. In his name we pray. Amen.