Gospel Doctrine
Lesson: Galatians
Reading: Acts 18:23-20:38; Galatians

PDF version of the lesson notes.

I. Introduction

A. Background

The lesson once again covers material in both Acts and a Pauline epistle. I am going to focus on the Pauline epistle: Galatians.

Authorship: Paul is the author of this epistle, and there has never been any doubt among scholars about its authorship.[1] It also is probably the most passionate of Paul's letters, and he very vigorously defends his understanding of the gospel.

Date Written: Dates proposed by scholars range from 49 to 58 CE. If it is was written in 49 or 50, then Galatians would actually be the first surviving letter written by Paul and the earliest extant Christian document.[2] However, the identification of 1 Thessalonians as the first Pauline epistle reflects the broader hypothesized date range for Galatians and that many scholars believe (given the range) that the probability that Galatians is written post 51 is pretty high.

The Recipients: The recipients of the letter are the churches in Galatia (part of modern Turkey). There seems to be considerable scholarly debate over what cities the churches in Galatia included.

B. A Signature

Before we jump into the message of the letter I want to highlight something about the writing of this letter and the Pauline letters in general. Read Galatians 6:11-12:

> (11) Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand. (12) As many as desire to make a fair shew in the flesh, they constrain you to be circumcised; only lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ.

Notice verse 11. It seems to suggest that Paul wants his recipients to know that he has written a long letter. Maybe to emphasize how serious he takes this issue. However, I don't think the King James translation is particularly good with regard to this verse, and I think it causes us to miss the importance of this sentence. Notice, how modern versions translate verse 11:

> (11) See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! --Galatians 6:11, NRSV

or

> (11) See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand! --Galatians 6:11, NIV

- What is going on here? Why would Paul mention that he is writing or writes with large letters? Why does Paul point out a feature of his handwriting? What does it tell us about how the letter was written? The end of chapter 6? The earlier part of the letter?

- Well, it suggests the Paul is now doing the writing of the letter and it appears there is a difference between his handwriting and his scribes handwriting (i.e., Paul's lettering was larger). In effect Paul is signing the document and providing evidence that the he is actually writing this portion of the letter (as opposed to some form of dictation). Remember, most people in Galatian churches never read the letter (they were illiterate); they heard it read aloud. Paul is making sure that the listener knows that this portion of the letter is personally written by him. It also implies that a scribe wrote the early part of the letter. Social Anthropologists, Malina and Pilch, provide the following context:

    > Paul was apparently among the 1 to 2 percent of the population that was literate, that is, who could read and write. It seems that he wrote some letters himself, others he dictated, and still others he might have given notes or ideas to an amanuensis who wrote the letter.[3]

- What does this imply about the nature of the letters we have from Paul?

II. The Prescript

Read Galatians 1:1-5:

> 1 Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead;) 2 And all the brethren which are with me, unto the churches of Galatia: 3 Grace be to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ, 4 Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father: 5 To whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

- Does Paul preview some of the important themes of the letter here in his opening greeting?

- How should we understand Paul's declaration that he is an apostle? How and what makes Paul an apostle?

- Is Paul's authority an important issue for the letter in general?

- What is the effect of verse 2? What is Paul saying about the brethren that are with him? Why might it be important to mention them? NT Wright translates that portion of the verse as "and the Family who are with me."[4] Does that help explain the rhetorical function of verse 2?

- Do you think verses 3-5 are a good summary of the gospel? Is anything important missing?

- Modern translation tend not to use the phrase "present evil world" in verse 4. For example, the NRSV is the follow:

  > 3 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,
  > 4 who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age,
  > according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be glory for ever
  > and ever. Amen. --NRSV

  Which fits better in this context? What do you make of the difference? Is the difference significant?

III. The Galatian Crisis

A. Paul's Distress

Read Galatians 1:6-9:

> 6 I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: 7 Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. 9 As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed. --KJV

> 6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel-- 7 not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! 9 As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed! --NRSV

- Paul suggests that the Galatians are deserting or turning away from him. Is it clear from these verses what he means by that? Does what Paul means by this become clear later in the epistle?

- Paul says he called them to the grace of Christ? What do you think that phrase means in this context?

B. Paul's Affection

Let's take a look at a few later verses to get a better sense of Paul's relationship with the saints in

Galatia. Paul had preached in Galatia at least once and maybe twice. Read Galatians 4:12-15:

> (12) Brethren, I beseech you, be as I am; for I am as ye are: ye have not injured me at all. (13) Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first. (14) And my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected; but received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus. (15) Where is then the blessedness ye spake of? for I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me. (16) Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?

- How does Paul feel about the people in Galatia? How does he remember his visit with them?

- Do these verses help explain the tone of the rest of the letter? Do you think it is important to keep in mind these verses when you read the rest of the letter?

- Can we say anything else about Paul's visit? Did he end up in Galatians because he was injured?

> (12) Friends, I beg you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong. (13) You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; (14) though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. (15) What has become of the goodwill you felt? For I testify that, had it been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. (16) Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? --Galatians 4:12-16, NRSV

- Why does Paul remind the church members at Galatia of his physical infirmities? What purpose does it serve? Does it further his argument in some way?

- Why would have Paul's infirmity been a test for the Galatian Christians? Why might it be remarkable that they welcomed him even though he suffered from an infirmity?

- G.N. Stanton suggests the following about the importance of the infirmity:[5]

> Paul's illness put the Galatian Christians "to the test" (v. 14), probably because their pre-Christian beliefs would have tempted them to draw the inference the Paul's illness was the result of demon possession.

Does the preceding quote affect or change how you understand the mentioning of his infirmity?

C. The Galatian Crisis

Some time after Paul's visit or visits, other Christian missionaries preached in Galatia and

perverted the gospel (Galatians 1:17). Maybe, the clearest statement about what the agitators or trouble-makers preached comes in Galatians 6:11-18 (see also 4:10 and 5:7-12):

> 11 Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand. 12 As many as desire to make a fair shew in the flesh, they constrain you to be circumcised; only lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ. 13 For neither they themselves who are circumcised keep the law; but desire to have you circumcised, that they may glory in your flesh. 14 But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world. 15 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature. 16 And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God. 17 From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus. 18 Brethren, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. --KJV
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> 11 See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! 12 It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcisedâ only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. 13 Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. 14 May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. 15 For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! 16 As for those who will follow this ruleâ peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God. 17 From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body. 18 May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.

- What exactly, according to Paul, where the trouble-makers preaching?
- What is the relationship between Paul and the missionaries that he feels agitated the situation? Would it be fair to call them opponents? Is their relationship to each other important?
- Why did Paul consider requiring circumcision of Gentile converts a perversion of the gospel of Christ?
- Do you think Paul is overreacting in this situation? Why is this such a big deal to Paul?
- Does verse 15 help us understand why the issue of circumcision is such a big deal to Paul?

> 15 For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! --NRSV

Does this verse hint at why Paul believes that requiring circumcision of Gentiles converts distorts the gospel message? What do you think is the new creation that Paul is referring to? Is it the kingdom of God or a new Israel, the saints in Galatia (each as new creatures undergoing spiritual rebirth), or something else? How might the issue of circumcision affect the new creation?

IV. Paul's interaction with the Church in Jerusalem

A. General Questions

After Paul's initial greeting (1:1-9), which includes a rebuke instead of a thanksgiving, Paul goes on to recount some of his personal history and interaction with church leadership in the next 1.5 chapters.

- What did you think of this interaction as you read Galatians? Where you bothered or troubled about? If so why? If not, Why not?

- Do you think it reveals an early church structure or dynamic among the leadership that is considerably different from our current structure? Is this an issue for the idea of a restoration? How does it affect our understanding of what the restoration is or isn't?

- Is there a danger in imposing the modern church structure on 1st century Christianity? Is there a bare minimum number of parallels that are required given a concept of restoration?

- Can you think of 19th or 20th century parallels to the situation that Paul describes (at least broadly speaking)?

B. Paul's Conversion

Read Galatians 1:10-17

> 10 For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ. 11 But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. 12 For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ. 13 For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it: 14 And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers. 15 But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, 16 To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: 17 Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus.

- Does verse 10 hint at what charge or criticism Paul faced from his critics? What charge does Paul seem to be responding to and do you think his answer is effective?

- Do you think is fair to say that Paul distances himself and emphasizes his independence from the other Apostles and the church leadership in Jerusalem?

- How does Paul describe and understand his call as an Apostle?

- what does it mean that Paul was not taught the gospel by man? Does that give us any hints into how Paul understands the term gospel?

- Paul mentions that he went to Arabia after his conversion and did not confer with flesh or blood. Do you think Paul wants his readers to recall the story of Elijah when Elijah experiences God in the Arabia (Sanai)?

C. Paul's First Visit With Peter

Read Galatians 1:18-24:

> 18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him
> fifteen days. 19 But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's
> brother. 20 Now the things which I write unto you, behold, before God, I lie not.
> 21 Afterwards I came into the regions of Syria and Cilicia; 22 And was unknown
> by face unto the churches of Judaea which were in Christ: 23 But they had heard
> only, That he which persecuted us in times past now preacheth the faith which
> once he destroyed. 24 And they glorified God in me.

- Paul seems to emphasize that he has had limited contact with other apostles. Why? What does the limited contact emphasize?

- If you had to guess, what charge do you think the trouble-makers were leveling at him? Do you think the trouble-makers were suggesting that he was a pawn of the apostles in Judaea? Maybe the trouble-makers were suggesting he was only the junior varsity team?

D. Standing Firm

Read Galatians 2:1-5:

> 1 Then fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took
> Titus with me also. 2 And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them
> that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were
> of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain. 3 But neither
> Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised: 4 And
> that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out
> our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage:
> 5 To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the

gospel might continue with you. -KJV

1 Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. 2 I went up in response to a revelation. Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain. 3 But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. 4 But because of false believers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us-- 5 we did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you. --NRSV

- What does Paul emphasize about his meeting in Jerusalem?
- What does this meeting tell us about the early church?
- What do you think Paul means by "false brethren" or "false family members?" Do you think the phrase is informative or important?
- Why might have circumcision become such a major point of contention in the early church as opposed to other parts of the Torah?

E. Peter and James

Read Galatians 2:6-10:

6 And from those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders (what they actually were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)â those leaders contributed nothing to me. 7 On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised 8 (for he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles), 9 and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. 10 They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.

- Is Paul walking a tightrope here given the lengths he went to earlier to emphasize his independence?
- What do you think of verse 6? It strikes me as almost funny. What is the point?
- What do you think of the phrase, "[they] recognized the grace that had been given to me?"

F. Paul Confronts Peter

Read Galatians 2:11-14:

> 11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; 12 for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. 13 And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. 14 But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

- How and why are the issues of table fellowship and circumcision related to each other? Is it fair to say that they are the same issue to Paul? Why?

- What do you make of Paul's argument? In what sense was Peter, according to Paul, not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel?

V. Justified by Faith

A. Declared Righteous

Read Galatians 2:15-21:

> (15) We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, (16) Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified. (17) But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is therefore Christ the minister of sin? God forbid. (18) For if I build again the things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor. (19) For I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God. (20) I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me. (21) I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain. -KJV

> 15 We are Jews by birth, not 'Gentile sinners'. 16 But we know that a person is not declared 'righteous' by works of the Jewish law, but through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah. That is why we too believed in the Messiah, Jesus: so that we might be declared 'righteous' on the basis of the Messiah's faithfulness, and not on the basis of works of the Jewish law. On that basis, you see, no creature will be declared 'righteous'. 17 Well, then; if, in seeking to be declared 'righteous' in the Messiah, we ourselves are found to be 'sinners', does that make the Messiah an agent of 'sin'? Certainly not! 18 If I build up once more the things which I tore

down, I demonstrate that I am a lawbreaker. 19 Let me explain it like this. Through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. 20 I have been crucified with the Messiah. I am, however, alive -- but it isn't me, it's the Messiah who lives in me. And the life I do still live in the flesh, I live within the faithfulness of the son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I don't set aside God's grace. If 'righteousness' comes through the law, then the Messiah died for nothing. -- NT Wright's translation

- Why does Paul contrast Jews by birth and sinning Gentiles? Why refer to sinning Gentiles when Paul emphasizes that both groups need Christ and not the "works of the law?"

- What does Paul mean when he says that "man is not justified by works of the law but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ?" How should we understand being justified or justification?

- Some scholars have suggested that the perhaps the closest English word for underlying Greek translated as "justified" in the KJV is actually "acceptability." "Specifically, divine acceptability, acceptable to the God of Israel."[6] Do you think that makes sense in this context? Or does another definition make more sense? How about "declared righteous?"

- Why does Paul emphasize and refer to the "works of the law?" Why not just say works? Is there a difference? Do you think Paul would agree with the following: "man is not justified by doing do good things (.e.g, being kind)?" Do you think that statement is equivalent to what Paul is talking about in these verses? How is it different? Does the fact that the backdrop for this is circumcision help us understand what "works of the law" means in this context?

- Why where the works of the law important to Israelites? What exactly do the "works of the law" refer to?

- Some scholars have suggested that, "'[w]orks of the law' ... refer to the Jewish 'identity markers' of Sabbath, circumcision, and dietary laws, rather than the the Mosaic law per se."[7] How does this affect how you understand the passage? Does it makes sense given the context (does chapter 3 contradict this idea)?

- Are we justified by faith in Christ or by the faithfulness of Christ?

- What is going on in verses 19-20? What does it mean to be dead to the law? Do you think the beginning of chapter 3 helps explain these verses?

- Do you think verse 21 is a short summary of Paul's whole argument? Does it help explain why Paul believed the actions of the trouble-makers were so bad or such a perversion?

B. NT Wright on Justification

NT Wright makes the following comments about this pericope (please forgive the relatively long quote):[8]

> The question Paul and Peter have run into, which was focused on whether Jewish and Gentile Christians were allowed to eat at the same table, is the question: who is God's true Israel? Who are the true people of God? Is it all who belong to the Messiah? Or is it only Jewish Christians (including proselytes, i.e., Gentiles who have converted to Judaism), with Gentile Christians remaining second-class citizens?
>
> Paul focuses his answer on the most basic point of all. God's true Israel consists of one person: the Messiah. He is the faithful one. He is the true Israelite. This is the foundation of identity within God's people. The question then becomes: who belongs to the Messiah? How is that identity expressed?
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> Paul answers this with one of his most famous beliefs, which remains difficult for modern Western minds to come to terms with. Those who belong to the Messiah are in the Messiah, so that what is true of him is true of them. The roots of this idea are in the Jewish beliefs about the king. The king represents his people (think of David fighting Goliath, representing Israel against the Philistines); what is true of him is true of them. The present paragraph doesn't spell this out; it assumes it. Paul will return to it in more detail later on. His point here is quite simple: all who are 'in the Messiah' are the true people of God. And that means Gentiles as well as Jews.
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> He speaks of himself, as a Jew who had become a Christian, to make the point. We Jews, he says, even though we were born into the covenant family, do not now find our real identity as God's people through the things which mark us out as a distinctive people -- that is, through the Jewish law. If we believe that Jesus is the Messiah (and without that there is no Christianity), we believe that the crucified Jesus is the Messiah. And if we are 'in' the crucified Jesus, that means that our previous identities are irrelevant. They are to be forgotten. We are no longer defined by possession of the law, or by its detailed requirements that set Jew over against Gentile. 'I died to the law, that I might live to God.' We must now learn who we are in a whole new way.
>
> Who then are we? We are the Messiah's people, with his life now at work in us. And, since the central thing about him is his loving faithfulness, the central thing about us, the only thing in fact that defines us, is our own loving faithfulness, the glad response of faith to the God who has sent his son to die for us. This is the very heart of Christian identity.

- What do you think of Wright's explanation of this pericope and justification?
- What parts to you agree with and what parts do you disagree with?

- Does this explanation help explain why Paul insisted justification was by faith alone?
- Does this explanation help you understand any of the earlier part of the letter better?

Endnotes

1. *Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 1152.
2. *Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 1152.
3. Malina, Bruce, and John Pilch, 2006, *Social Science Commentary on the Letter of Paul*, Fortress Press, 217.
4. Wright, NT, Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians, 2.
5. *Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 1161.
6. Malina, Bruce, and John Pilch, 2006, *Social Science Commentary on the Letter of Paul*, Fortress Press, 201.
7. *Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 1158.
8. Wright, NT, Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians, 26.