

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Growing a Culture of Grace

(Studies in Paul's letter to the Galatians)

Loyalty to Jesus' Gospel

(Acts 13-14; Galatians 1:1-9)

Study #1

Introduction: Culture-making...

A couple of years ago, my daughter-in-law, Courtney, whom I highly esteem, spoke highly of a book she had just read. That was good enough for me. I read it. The book is now one of my favorites.

It's titled, A Church Called Tov.¹ That word, *tov*, is the Hebrew word for *good*. In the first chapter of Genesis, when God looked at His creation, He declared it "***good***" / *tov*.

The authors wrote A Church Called Tov in the wake of news in their city about some churches that had *toxic* cultures. Those churches were marked by the abuse of power, control, rigidity, and other harmful stuff - all the opposite of *tov*.

A church with a *tov* culture will be marked by all the traits that Jesus modeled and all that the rest of the New Testament champions.

Before Tov, another author, Andy Crouch, wrote another very good book about culture. Crouch called his book Culture-Making.

Crouch helps us understand what culture is by illustration. He says that culture is the water in which a fish swims, the air in which a bird flies, the soil in which a worm tunnels.

And he chose a different word than *tov* to describe a good culture: *shalom*. *Shalom* means peace or wholeness.

Andy says that a *shalom* culture is one where everything that is good / *tov* can exist and what is bad cannot exist. A good culture permits *tov* and disallows toxicity.

The better the water culture, the more the fish thrive. The better the air culture, the more the birds flourish. The better the soil, the better the worms wriggle and multiply.

And the more *tov* and *shalom* that exists in the culture of a church, the more the people in it will thrive, the less toxicity there will be, and the more it will shine to the surrounding culture.

For several weeks, this idea of a *tov-shalom* church culture has been percolating in my mind and has captured my imagination.

I have been asking myself, "*Where do we find a book in the New Testament in which the author fights for the essentials of belief and behavior? Where do we see an author fight for a tov-shalom culture?*"

And I kept coming back to the Apostle Paul's letter to the churches of Galatia. So, here we are.

Over the next two to three months, we'll be listening to Paul's words to the Galatians with a special focus on what he is saying to us, as a church.

We're going to let God's Word lead us into the values and priorities that will grow a culture of truth and liberty and service and love. In short, grace.

I'll start off by laying out the back story that led to Paul's sending this letter.

The Early Spread of Jesus' Gospel

¹ Written by Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer.

From Antioch to VERY Remote Places (Acts 13-14)

The Jesus movement began in Jerusalem, the place where Jesus died and rose again - and it was never supposed to end there.

Jesus' vision was global. So, hats off to the early disciples, because within a few short years, the mandate of Acts 1:8 - take the message from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the remotest place in the world - was actually being fulfilled.

In fact, within fifteen years of Jesus' death, a vibrant Christian community was established in the Syrian city of Antioch, about three hundred miles north of Jerusalem.²

One of the distinctive features of the church in Antioch was its rich ethnic diversity. And it may be due to that diversity that the church at Antioch had a heart to reach out to diverse groups of people who had never heard the good news about Jesus.

At that church in Antioch, the Holy Spirit first, and then the church commissioned two of its members - Barnabas and Saul (whom we know better as Paul) - to travel and to spread the Gospel of Jesus.

Paul and Barnabas³ went, primarily, to people living in four cities: Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.

These cities were all in the region of Galatia. There they evangelized and made disciples. God performed miracles of healing and saved people's souls. The Spirit of God transformed lives and families and even whole communities.

Along the way, Paul and Barnabas faced opposition. At least one riot broke out. There was rejection of the message and the messengers. In Lystra, Paul was stoned nearly to death.

² It was due to the testimony of the Antioch church that believers in Jesus were first given the nickname, Christ-Ones (likely meant pejoratively). They had grown into a stable, active, spiritually alive congregation by the mid-40's of the 1st century.

³ The order of the names and Paul's name change (from Saul to Paul) occurred midway through the trip, signifying that Paul had become the leader and that Paul's focus would be on Gentiles (*Paul* being the Romanized version of his name).

But, at the end of the day, those who had received the Gospel and had believed in Jesus formed communities of faith - we call them *ekklesias* (churches).⁴

Paul and Barnabas took Jesus' "**remotest part of the earth**" comment more seriously than it had yet been taken.

People who had never heard the name "Jesus" were saved by Jesus. The lives of a lot of people who lived in Galatia were changed. So, before going any further, here are some fun facts to know and tell about Galatia, what we today call Turkey.

The Remote Area in Question: Galatia

Geography

It's rugged country, plagued by dust storms, locust infestations, frequent droughts, blistering summer heat (sound familiar?), and bitter cold winters.

Population

The term *Galatia* derives from the word *Gaul* (or *Celt*). It referred to a region inhabited by tribes of people who had formerly lived in what is now Eastern Europe.⁵

These Gauls migrated north as far as the British Isles (known there as the Celts) and south and east as far as Asia Minor and Turkey.⁶

⁴ You can read about this journey (the First Missionary Journey) in Acts 13-14.

⁵ In the ancient world, the term "Galatia" sometimes referred to the region inhabited by ethnic Galatians in present-day Turkey. The term "Galatia" also referred to a Roman province, which stretched from the Black Sea in the north, to the Mediterranean Sea in the south. This province included areas that weren't particularly "Galatian," ethnically. My understanding is that Paul is using the term in this second way in his letter.

⁶ Two centuries before the writing of Galatians, there is evidence that the Gauls / Celts were very wealthy. They lived in tribes, each tribe ruled by a king-like figure, and were largely independent of each other, living in well-organized societies.

They were famous for being fierce and fiercely independent.

And at the time of Paul's and Barnabas' journey, this region was also occupied by Romans, Greeks, Pisidians, Lycaonians, and Jews.

There was a lot of diversity. And, while diversity is delightful and enriching, going to Galatia was risky.

Character

Taking the Christian message through Galatia was hard. Extremely hard. I've already mentioned the dangerous terrain, the independent people groups, and the serious persecution that Paul and Barnabas endured.

So, we might wonder, why go? Why go to a place that is so hard and to people who are going to be so resistant to what you have to say?

Well, for one thing, they had a command from Jesus. He said, **"Go!"** - and they went.

But it wasn't grudging obedience to carry out a command they weren't all that excited about that led them to Galatia.

No, when Paul actually addressed the purpose of their trip while speaking in a Jewish synagogue in Galatia, in the city of Pisidian Antioch, he didn't even mention Jesus' command. He didn't say, *"Jesus told us we had to do this."*

No. He highlighted the benefit that believing in Jesus brings.

[Acts 13:38] "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and [39] through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses."

They could be counted on, though, to band together against a non-Gallic enemy (like Rome) and fight ferociously.

Paul and Barnabas went to the Jews in Galatia because they knew that the message of Jesus was better than the message of Moses.

And when, on this same trip, they spoke to the Gentiles, they went because the message of Jesus was better in every way than that of the false gods of the Greeks and Romans. (Acts 14:15-18)

They went because the message of Jesus was Gospel. It was good news for the people who hadn't yet heard. And it was primarily good news in that it brought news of freedom.

Jesus' message brings...
...freedom *from* bondage and freedom *to* a life centered on the Gospel.
...freedom *from* a toxic culture of power and oppression and rules and freedom *to* a *tov-shalom* culture based on love and service and grace.

That's why Paul and Barnabas went to Galatia. Why, then, did Paul write this letter so soon AFTER they got back from the trip?⁷

Why Did Paul Write Galatians?

Suffering Leads to Gospel Gains

Remember. Jesus suffered terribly for these Galatians. And remember that Paul suffered greatly to bring the message of Jesus.

So, given all that he went through for their spiritual benefit, Paul had a great personal stake in seeing that the Galatians stayed on course when it came to following Jesus into freedom.

He wrote this letter because of evidence that they were NOT staying the course.⁸

⁷ It is worth mentioning, too, that Paul's letter to the Galatian churches, written as it was before the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, was sent out around A.D. 49, making it Paul's first inspired correspondence.

⁸ Some of the Jews to whom Paul and Barnabas preached believed and became healthy leaders of the churches in Galatia. Others were pharisaical. (and may well have been Pharisees) Some of these may have been believers, others not. Their troubling teachings were dismissed at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15).

Here's my best attempt at putting together the story of what happened that prompted Paul to sit down and write.

About the time that he and Barnabas returned from their missions trip to Galatia, some Christian Jews came from Judea to Antioch, with a troubling teaching.

Gospel Losses Quickly Mount

They said, **[Acts 15:1] "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."**

These men were combining the old system of Judaism with the new message of Christianity.

Their teaching clashed with what Paul and Barnabas taught AND with what they had just experienced in Galatia.

There, both Jews and Gentiles were saved only through faith in Jesus without reference to obedience to the Mosaic Law in any shape, form, or fashion.

Paul knew that a message demanding anything other than belief in Jesus and His promise of eternal life was no Gospel at all.

But these men were causing trouble by their teaching in Antioch, where Paul and Barnabas were AND they were causing trouble in Galatia where Paul and Barnabas had just been.

So, as soon as Paul heard about this new teaching, he wrote a letter to remind the Galatians of what they dared not forget.⁹

A Gospel-Centered Culture (1:1-9)

Apostleship Bestowed, Not Earned, Not Won (vv. 1-2)

⁹ In my chronology, the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 was held shortly after Paul wrote Galatians.

[1:1] Paul, an apostle (not sent from men, nor through human agency, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), [2] and all the brothers who are with me, to the churches of Galatia...

Paul didn't become Jesus' apostle by winning a popularity contest. Nor was he voted into office.

Writing from Antioch with brothers surrounding him (at least including Barnabas) he reminded the Galatians that his apostleship had been given to him by God.¹⁰

He wasn't writing all this to brag. He was writing to authenticate what he's going to say about the Gospel and about life in Jesus.

And now we listen to Paul's greetings to the Galatians, which are greetings, and so much more.

The Amazing Works of Jesus (vv. 3-5)

[3] Grace to you and peace¹¹ from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, [4] who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, [5] to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen.

Grace

Here is Paul's wish and prayer for his friends in Galatia: Grace.

¹⁰ And we remember Jesus' appearance to Paul on the road to Damascus, Paul's dramatic conversion, and Jesus' promise that Paul would suffer greatly as he spread the Gospel as an apostle to the Gentiles.

¹¹ Paul was upset as he wrote this letter. It was well-reasoned and logical, but there is an emotional bite to Galatians. In many of his letters, there is an introductory commendation for faithfulness. There is in Romans, 1 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 2 Timothy and Titus. There is none of that here.

Of course, they had already received God's grace when they believed. To receive grace is the opposite of earning a wage. Grace has nothing to do with works or merit.

The Galatians had been justified before God by grace at no cost to themselves because Jesus paid it all. No works required or accepted.

Paul's prayer is that they would live in that grace.

Peace

When they received grace, they also received peace. Peace is a grace dividend. The divide between the sinner and God is erased when the sinner believes. At that moment, she or he has peace WITH God.

This second part of Paul's wish and prayer for his Galatian friends is that they would experience the peace OF God in full.

Forgiveness

Then, Paul mentions something that God has done for those who believe. He identifies the Lord Jesus Christ as the one who "***gave Himself for our sins.***" (v. 4)

Jesus was the Lamb of God who died on the cross to take away the world's guilt for sin. (John 1:29) It was what was finished when Jesus said from the cross, "***It is finished!***" (John 19:30)

By His death on the cross, Jesus accomplished many things. What is highlighted here is that He died as a sacrifice and offering to God for our sins.

We are forgiven by Jesus' death on the cross. Done.

And to this finished fact of our forgiveness, Paul adds another thought. And this thought isn't about something that is done.

Rescue

[4] who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age...

Starting out where Paul ends, I would agree. The age in which he lived and the age in which we live is, presently, evil.

I'm not saying that everything about this present age is evil. In fact, some aspects of this age are delightful and beautiful.

But there is plenty of ugliness and evil, lots of anti-God thinking and living, lots of evidence of the evil one's activity with his "*stealing, killing, and destroying*" ways. (See John 10:10)

Paul says something here about rescue. So, let's drill down deeper into what Paul writes about God's rescue plan.

He could have written, ***[4] who gave Himself for our sins and rescued us from this present evil age.***

And if he had written that, we would be focusing on two finished acts: forgiveness and rescue.

But he didn't write that.

He wrote about one work that Jesus has finished in which we played no role (forgiveness) and one as yet unfinished work (rescue from this present evil age) in which we play a vital role.

The way Paul said what he said lets us know that this rescue *might* or *might not* occur. And the determining factor will be whether or not we live out the grace, peace, and forgiveness we have received.¹²

Paul is introducing here the idea of two competing cultures.

¹² In the Greek language, the word "***gave***" would be better translated, "*the one who gave.*" It is a present active participle, representing something that had happened. "***Might rescue***" is a verb in the subjunctive mood, indicating something that might or might not happen.

There is the culture of the present evil age AND there is another culture we can enter if we allow ourselves to be rescued from that evil culture.

The new culture is one in which grace, peace, and forgiveness reigns. It is a *tov-shalom* culture. It is a Gospel culture.

Now, all of this is enticing. We hear this and we want to run into the beautiful Gospel culture Jesus has for us.

Well, Paul wrote because the Galatian Christians were running right back into bondage. They had been given grace, peace, forgiveness - and more! - and were returning to chains.

You may have seen the story of the US soldier who recently defected to North Korea. It's a very troubling story, and it's been a month and we still don't know what is happening to him.

This is a "man bites dog" story. It's VERY unusual for someone to sneak *into* North Korea.

Over the last seventy years of the Kim dynasty, thousands of people have escaped and thousands more have died trying to escape North Korea. Only a handful of people over the last seventy years have snuck into North Korea, seeking poverty, oppression, bondage.

And I have never read of a North Korean who has escaped North Korea sneaking back into North Korea.

But that is what members of the churches of Galatia were doing - and that is what any believer in Jesus does - who walks away from the simple message of grace found in the Gospel of Jesus.

A Fly in the Ointment (vv. 6-9)

Deserting the One who called you (v. 6)

[6] I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting¹³ Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel...

Remembering how much he - and the Galatians! - had suffered when the churches were being established, Paul was devastated that the Galatians had become deserters (an ancient military term).

And notice. He did not fault them for deserting the Gospel (which they did), but for deserting Jesus ("***deserting HIM who called you***") for a "***different*** [kind of a] ***Gospel.***"

They were guilty of a stunning act of disloyalty.

Those disturbing distorters (v. 7)

[7] which is not just another account; but there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

The Gospel the troublemakers were preaching was not another similar, but slightly different, new and improved, Gospel. It was an entirely different sort of so-called gospel.¹⁴

The false Gospel Paul accused the Galatians of falling for said that they had to finish what Jesus began.

The true Gospel says, "*Jesus paid it all. It's all of grace.*" It is faith alone in Christ alone that saves. Jesus justifies people as a gift.¹⁵

Embracing that Gospel brings a life of grace and peace. It leads to rescue from this present evil age. It grows a culture of grace.

¹³ "***Deserting***" (μετατιθημι) - See Jude 4; Heb. 11:5; Heb. 7:12.

¹⁴ The word that we translate "***another***" in verse 7 is a different Greek word than the word for "***another***" he used in verse 6. The word in verse 6 meant "*another of a different kind.*" (*heteros*) The word in verse 7 means "*another of the same kind.*"

¹⁵ When Jesus said, from the cross, "***It is finished.***" He meant, "***It is finished.***" There was no work left for Him or anyone else to do. The gift of eternal life is a gift given to the one who simply believes, separate from any works of any kind.

Paul doesn't come right out and tell us what the differences were between the Gospel he preached and the one that was being offered to the Galatians by the troublemakers.¹⁶

But since the letter he writes has so much to say about *grace* and *faith* and *life in the Spirit*, the false Gospel is probably all about the opposite: Law and works and flesh.

The Galatians gobbled up that junk food, with the result that they were, Paul says, "**disturbed.**" (v. 7).

One way to be disturbed is to be disturbed and know you are disturbed. If you see a movie that's a lot scarier than you had expected it would be, you're disturbed by it, and you know it. You won't get to sleep. You'll feel agitated.

But there are those who are disturbed, and don't know it.

A child who lives in a violent home is disturbed. But she believes that her experience is normal. The child is disturbed and doesn't know it.

And Christians who have fallen for the lie that life in Jesus is all about rules-keeping and measuring up and better-nots and do's and don'ts have been disturbed by a lie and don't even know it.

That was what happened to the brand-new Christians in Galatia. It has happened through the centuries, and it keeps on happening today.

It is a far more serious thing to be "disturbed" and not know it than to be "disturbed" and disturbed about it.

Paul was desperate to rescue his friends from their disturbance and from the teaching that had disturbed them.

So, you may be shocked by what he says next. He pulls no punches. Paul is playing hardball with the troublemakers who have disturbed his friends with a no-good-news gospel.

Keep it true; keep it simple (vv. 8-9)

[8] But even if we, or an angel from heaven,¹⁷ should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed.¹⁸ [9] As we have said before, even now I say again: if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed.

Paul was not being very open-minded here. There was no sense of, "*You have your Gospel and I have mine.*" No.

This expansive, flexible, broad-minded, culturally eclectic man was as narrow as a rail when it came to the Gospel.

Paul knew that a message that either included Law-keeping to get it or that required Christians to "measure up" if they wanted to stay in God's family was nothing but a trap.

It wouldn't bring glory to God. It wouldn't rescue from this present evil age. And it sure wouldn't produce a *tov-shalom* culture that would entice a watching world to consider Jesus.

Paul took a stand because some things are worth fighting for.

He took the fight to the false teachers because he knew what was at stake if their teaching carried the day. Twice he called down God's curse on them.¹⁹

¹⁷ Why "**angel from Heaven**"? Perhaps he wanted the Galatians to recall when he and Barnabas were mistaken for gods in Lystra (Acts 14).

¹⁸ In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, this word - **accursed** - denoted *something devoted to destruction (under the ban)*. See Joshua 6:21.

¹⁹ In Romans 9:3, Paul said that if it were possible, he would be willing to be separated from Christ ("**anathema**") if he could see his fellow-Jews come to faith in Jesus. So here, when he says of the troublemakers, "**...let him be accursed**"

¹⁶ He does indicate that it had to do with circumcision. (See Galatians 5, Acts 15)

Don't tamper with the Gospel. Don't take anything away from it and don't add anything to it.

Faith alone in Jesus Christ alone saves. Period. Beautiful.

Conclusion:

Jesus' plan, Paul's passion, and the whole New Testament's vision is that the groups of believers who would gather in Jesus' Name (we call these gatherings *churches*) would...

...display a fresh new way of living.

...reflect a winsome new set of values.

...live with a new Jesus-centered energy and purpose.

It's a culture thing. And the first cultural mark of a *tov-shalom* church that Paul highlights here in the first paragraph of Galatians is loyalty to Jesus' Gospel.

Specifically, that faith alone in Jesus alone is all that is required to receive the gift of eternal life.

The good news is that the Good News is simple. Straight to the point. It is uncomplicated enough for a child to understand and profound enough to capture a genius' imagination for a lifetime.

Of course, there is more than loyalty to Jesus' Gospel involved in growing a culture of GRACE at a church, at our church.

And over the weeks that we will be looking into Galatians, we'll see that our church is called to be marked by other distinctives like integrity, courage, faith, love, dependance on the Spirit, and service.

And we are to be marked by these to such a degree that more and more people will be attracted to the Jesus we follow, will believe and find life in Him, and will be rescued into a Jesus-centered culture.

So, imagine a woman who is a mature, solid believer in Jesus. She clings to the Gospel and is a loving servant. She is marked by integrity. She depends on the Spirit and dispenses grace.

That woman is going to make an impact for Jesus in her world.

Now, imagine that this woman has a friend who is on the same track. The impact of these two, together, will be more than doubled.

Add a few more people to these two who are in alignment when it comes a commitment to the Gospel, commitment to love and service, commitment to living out the grace they have received from God. The increased numbers will be a force multiplier.

From that community of Jesus-followers there will be formed a Gospel and grace, *tov-shalom* culture. That group will shine like a bright light in a world of great need.

Paul was not just writing to individual Christians, urging them to enjoy the freedom for which Christ set them free.

He was writing to churches, urging that they adopt the values and truths of the Gospel and create an alternate culture that will entice the world to hunger and to thirst for what only Jesus can provide.

does he mean to say, "Let those who teach 'Jesus and.....' come under the just condemnation of God"? It would certainly appear so.