

At Stake the Truth of the Gospel

by Alistair Begg

The sermon emphasizes the importance of maintaining the truth of the gospel and standing firm against false teachings that seek to dilute or distort its message.

Duration: 42:12

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Galatians 2:4-10, 2 Timothy 4:3-5, James 2:14

Topics: "Gospel"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ fearlessly and boldly. He encourages believers not to be hesitant or silent in a world that desperately needs the good news. The preacher warns against being swayed by changing human wisdom and false teachings, urging believers to hold fast to the truth of the gospel. He reminds Timothy, and by extension all believers, to guard the deposit of faith entrusted to them and to preach the word with patience and careful instruction. The sermon emphasizes the urgency of preserving and proclaiming the gospel for future generations.

Transcript

Our gracious Father, we freely acknowledge that we cannot do anything as we ought without your help, and so we pray that you will enable us so to speak and listen, and that you will write your word upon our hearts, for Jesus' sake. Amen. We come this morning to what is our third or fourth study, I think our fourth study in the section we'll deal with today.

You discover that the issue is a strange one upon first encounter. It is this, espionage in the early church. Those who might be inclined at writing novels could find at least something here for part of a plot at least, because it is definitely espionage that's taking place.

Paul identifies it very clearly in saying that there were spies, verse 4, who had infiltrated the ranks. They had come in the way good spies come in, in a way that you'd never know they were spies. What good is a spy who comes in with a hat, with a sign on the top saying, I am a spy? But they had arrived, and they had taken their places, and they had begun to make their assessments and their judgments, and at stake was the truth of the gospel.

And Paul, as he reaches into this next section of his letter, wants these people to understand that these spies were pseudo-Christians, or as J.B. Phillips paraphrases it, they were sham Christians. And the extent of their spying was to see just to what degree the expressions of Christian liberty were being

sustained amongst the people of God. Those who had been redeemed freely by God's grace, and who were rejoicing now in the freedom which was theirs, were the subjects of the scrutiny of some who wanted to deny them that very freedom.

And so, as you read, you discover that these individuals were concerned not simply to discover who these people were, but also to destroy the freedom that they enjoyed. And that's why you will find at the end of verse 4 the phrase that their desire was to make us slaves. Now, if you were seeking to circumvent a movement of God, if you were seeking to attack it in a way that would bring it down, there are a number of approaches that might be taken, and we will see some as we go through this letter.

The one that is in application as we come to these opening verses of chapter 2 we might summarize simply as an approach to divide and conquer. If these false teachers could somehow show that the proclamation of the gospel by Paul was different from that which was being proclaimed by Peter and by James, by John, by the rest of the apostles, then they would destroy the unity of the apostolic band, and in destroying that unity would make it far easier to bring down this gospel of grace which they were proclaiming. And it is this which is the issue before us now.

Now, some of us may be tempted on the surface and somewhat immediately to assume that these kind of issues are rather irrelevant now in the 20th century. After all, does it really matter whether Titus was circumcised or not? It's a long, long time since the apostles walked the Jerusalem streets. Are the issues of their unity of relevance to dwellers in the 20th century? Any of us who have such a notion that thinks in terms of potential irrelevance, I trust we'll have it dispelled by the end of our study this morning.

We're going to gather our thoughts around three main headings. I'll give them to you so that you might know where we're going. They are these.

Number one, a question of orthodoxy. Number two, a matter of urgency. And number three, a picture of unity.

First of all, then, a question of orthodoxy. If your eyes light on verse one, you will see that into the headquarters of the Jerusalem church walks the apostle Paul. He doesn't come alone.

He comes with partners. He brings Barnabas with him. Barnabas, the Jew, the man of faith, the great encourager about whom we read in the Acts of the Apostles.

He was a safe fellow to bring into the Jerusalem church. But the other chap wasn't just as safe. Titus.

Why not? First of all, because Titus was a Gentile. And secondly, to add to the problem, he was an uncircumcised Gentile. He was a product of Paul's missionary zeal.

And into the enclave of the dispersing church of Jesus Christ, into its heartland, if you like, in its emergence from monotheistic Judaism, walks Paul to challenge the very notions that somehow the gospel might be limited in its expressions and may simply find itself surrounding the Jewish synagogues of the day. It's perhaps hard for us to get a flavor for what he was doing here and the impact of it. It's a somewhat trivial illustration, but perhaps it will help us to fasten on the notion.

Imagine that you were going to a Cleveland Browns game, that you had decided that you were going to in what is known as the dog pound, that you called one of your friends from out of town, and you invited him to come to this game. It was against the Pittsburgh Steelers. And when your friend arrived at your home,

he was dressed completely in the colors of the Pittsburgh Steelers.

You at that point had a number of problems--others to be discovered if you were prepared to take that friend, dressed in that way, right in to that dog pound. And the incongruity of it all would be such that your existence would be in marginal jeopardy, and it is questionable whether that fellow would come out dressed in the way in which he arrived. You get the picture? Okay.

Well, when Paul went with Titus into the Jerusalem church, the experience was somewhat akin to that, and at issue was the orthodoxy of the gospel of Jesus Christ. You see, the battle cry of those Judaizers, the false teachers, you can find in Acts chapter 15 and verse 1. This was the slogan of these people. Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.

It was not a marginal issue. They were saying, if you are not circumcised the way Moses taught, you cannot be a true Christian. And so Paul takes Titus into the Jerusalem context and explodes the mythology of such a view.

And as he writes to the Galatians, he is reminding them of the nature of these things, because of the problem that they face within their fellowship. And in verse 2, he says that I went there not on a whim, but I went in response to a revelation, that God was at work within his heart, that the counsel of others was put in gear, that the circumstances of his life--all these things came together--and he went on this journey. And when he arrived there, we're told that he set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles.

And indeed, he did set before them the gospel that he preached. He didn't simply set before them the gospel in terms of verbal accuracy, but he set before them the gospel in terms of personal testimony. And if you like, when Titus took his seat in that congregation, there was the gospel which Paul preached before the Gentiles--salvation by grace, through faith, plus nothing.

And Titus was an uncircumcised Gentile, but he was a converted Christian. And Paul's statement was, and he needs nothing more. Now, we're told again in verse 2 that he made his initial approach on a private basis--that he went up amongst the leaders, not because he doubted the orthodoxy of his position.

He'd been preaching this message for the last fourteen years. You read some people, and they say that he went up privately because he was afraid somehow that he'd got it wrong. Got it wrong for fourteen years, and now he was going to check? No, he went privately initially because he desired that the testimony of their partnership would be able to be made public in such a way that it would render fruitless the attempts of these spies to show that there was disunity amongst those who were proclaiming the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so, they were going to establish their harmony in the proclamation of the gospel. Now, it's important for us, as we come at this from the twentieth century, to realize that at issue then and at issue now was not so much the particulars of the external right of circumcision, but it was the fundamental issue concerning the parameters of Christian freedom. And while the issue of circumcision may be an irrelevancy in the twentieth century, the parameters of Christian freedom are a vital question that must be answered.

And at the heart of it all, in the phrase in verse five, is, as we've said in our heading, the truth of the gospel. Titus had believed in Jesus, he'd been accepted by God in Christ, and Paul says, that is enough. Problem? The Judaizers were making acceptance based upon obedience to rules and regulations, and so they were replacing freedom with bondage.

Consequently, as you turn forward to chapter five of Galatians, Paul's great cry, which is, if you like, the heartbeat of the epistle, is very, very straightforward. Galatians five, verse one, it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

At issue was and remains the orthodoxy of the gospel--not an issue of marginal significance either to the mighty apostle Paul or to the lowly believer today. A question of orthodoxy. Second, it was a matter of urgency.

Let me read to you Philip's paraphrase of the fifth verse. He says, We did not give these men an inch, for the truth of the gospel for you and all Gentiles was at stake. In other words, they came to the door, and we weren't prepared to open the door even an inch to their feet, because what they were proclaiming was wrong.

What they were saying diluted and discarded the essentials of the gospel, and we weren't going to allow them to get their foot in the door and get their message into the minds of true believers and get their insidious nonsense as a disruptive force amongst the community of faith. It was extremely urgent. And so, when Paul addresses himself to the others that he makes this meeting with in Jerusalem, he knows that it's very, very important.

Would they try and contradict what he'd been saying? Would they seek to modify his proclamation? Would they edit it in any way? Would they seek to trim it? Perhaps would they supplement it? And the answer is provided for us in the sixth verse. God, he says, doesn't judge by external appearance. So these leaders, as important as they were, I wasn't overawed by them.

And he says, Those men added nothing to my message. Now, that's a very, very important phrase, because the Judaizers were saying something needs to be added to this message. It is as Paul proclaims it, plus this.

If you don't have this, you are not truly saved. And so, when Paul has his discussion with the rest of the elders, sets before them Titus, explains the gospel he's been proclaiming for 14 years, it is significant that their response is, Paul, that's dead on. You got it clear? That's exactly what we are saying as well.

And so, they were able to close ranks against the pseudo-Christians, the shams, the hypocrites who wanted to rob the believer of their freedom in Jesus Christ--wanted to rob them of their understanding that they didn't make themselves acceptable to God by the keeping of the law, but that they were accepted by God because Christ had kept it perfectly and had paid the penalty for the sins of the lawbreakers such as them and ourselves this morning. And so, the urgent matter reaches the forefront of his thinking. And you will note well that Paul's concern was not that he would be proved right.

Notice verse 5. We did not give in to them for a moment so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you. It wasn't that Paul was an egotist. It wasn't that he just wanted to be able to go out and say, I told you so.

It was a far more important matter than that. Paul says the reason that we were so strong on these issues was so that you might have the gospel in your own hands, so that you might embrace the gospel in your lives, so that you might proclaim the gospel to a subsequent generation. In other words, the apostle Paul had a sense of history.

He recognized that the gospel couldn't be tampered with, it couldn't be diluted, without ceasing to be what it was. I want to say to you that that is as true this morning in the twentieth century as it was in the first century. The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ this morning cannot be diluted and tampered with, except that it ceases to be the gospel.

And it is not a question as to whether we know what the gospel is, or that is your view of the gospel, or another's view of the gospel. The Scriptures make it manifestly plain. And all down through the years since the first century, men and women have gone and been martyred for the same concern of Paul.

And they have stood against the tide of popular opinion. They've been burned at the stake. People were burned in Great Britain in an earlier century for simply translating the Bible into the language of English.

The Covenanters were chased all around Scotland because they held true to the truth of the gospel. And the Roman Catholic royalty sent out the troops to find and to destroy these conventicles in the hillsides of our land, my land. And men and women, some of whose names remain and whose faces we will never see till glory, buried themselves in that context and proclaim the gospel in all of its fullness.

Why? Simply that they might be seen to be right? No. So that the gospel might be freely ours today in this great land. And we build on the foundations of others who have held to such a view.

And as I go on, I'm going to show you that if we don't have the same conviction, subsequent generations will have great cause to disdain us. Paul was in no doubt about this when he wrote his Swan Song. That is 2nd Timothy.

Turn to it just for a moment, if you would, if your Bible is open. When he wrote his final letter, as if you like the retiring general, passing on the fundamentals to Timothy, his young lieutenant, he says in 2nd Timothy chapter 1 verses 13 and 14, after he's told them not to be ashamed of the gospel, don't be ashamed of me. He says in verse 13, what you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching.

The word for pattern is the architect's drawings. It is the detailed plans for construction. Don't fiddle with it.

Just keep it. Keep it as the pattern of sound teaching. With faith, you'll need it.

And love, it demands it in Christ Jesus. And then, Timothy, do this. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you.

Now, if you guard something, what do you do? If you're guarding something, you don't let anyone fiddle with it. Yesterday I conducted a wedding, and I made the same statement as I always do to the best man and to the bridesmaid. I said, now you hold those rings and look after them.

Don't fiddle around with them. Don't play with them. Don't give them to anybody.

Just you keep good hold of them. Because when I say the rings, I expect them to be there. And I don't expect them to be there half as much as the bride and groom expect them to be there.

So, guard them. That's what Paul says. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you.

Guard it, how? With the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us. Turn forward to chapter four and listen to him as he reaches the conclusion of his letter. And it's the same issue here, you see.

It's the matter of urgency, the truth of the gospel, that it might remain with subsequent generations. 2 Timothy 4.2. Preach the word. Be prepared in season and out of season.

Correct, rebuke, and encourage with great patience and careful instruction. Let me pause for a moment and use another illustration. In surgery, when a surgeon is showing his junior colleague where to make incisions, how to tie off tubes, how to remove the upper layers of material to get to the place at the right moment, at the right time, etc., he uses the absolute, utmost care.

I would imagine that no one is going to make it very far in the understudy position to an expert surgeon who, when the surgeon is giving instruction, and as he talks through what he's doing, turns around to find the understudy going, he's going to turn to the guy and say, hey, hey, hey, do you realize how crucial this is? You don't stand there and whistle and talk to the nurses. Do you want to be a surgeon? Do you want to do it right? Get your eyes here. Don't let them move from this spot.

Is that important to you? Yes. Because you may be the one on the table, under the scalpel of Whistling George. And so it's important that Whistling George quits whistling and starts watching.

It's vital. It's urgent. And what has happened down through the years, and peculiarly in church history in the 18th and 19th century, is that men began to doubt the truth of God's word.

And when the word was being proclaimed, they started to whistle, and they started to deny, and they started to doubt, and they started to dispel it all. And they then, the second generation, began to take the university chairs of the great European universities. And they then began to teach the Bible in a way that wasn't true to the gospel.

And then students sat under their spurious teaching, and then inhabited the congregations of Germany and of England, and began to proclaim nonsense under the disguise of truth. What had happened? There was the breakdown described in the first century, verse 3, for the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. And so he says, Timothy, you better realize that.

And frankly, the time will come, and will come, and will come. It was there then. It's there today.

Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth, and they will turn aside to myths. But you, Timothy, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, and discharge all the duties of your ministry.

Turn back to Galatians. The greatest challenges, the great challenge facing Paul in this chapter, the great challenges facing the church today, do not come from the full frontal onslaught of the bizarre, but come from the subtle, insidious infiltration of what at first glance seems so right. That is the great challenge.

To this fellowship, that is the great challenge to our nation, and that is the great challenge to our world. Paul says, I am so concerned that the truth of the gospel might remain with you. As I read and reread that phrase inside of my desk this week, one of the factors which stood out so clearly to me was the simple, vital truth that when you think of all the philosophies of men that have come throughout the years--when you think of all the changes, Aristotelian, Platonic, whatever it might be, Bertrand Russell, the archetypal pessimist of the twentieth century, perhaps the greatest twentieth-century philosopher--he's the man who said, Only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair can the soul's habitation be built.

Well, he has gone to his grave with that echoing in his students' ears. But while all of that has come and gone, the gospel has not changed. The gospel remains the gospel.

Isn't it a wonder? I wish I could sing. I'd sing this song. I heard an old, old story, how Jesus came from glory and gave his life a ransom from sin to set me free.

I heard about something else, his precious blood atoning, and I repented of my sin. And he won the victory. There's victory in Jesus.

Why should we as believers this morning be so bashful about walking out onto the streets of Cleveland with such timeless good news? Why should we be so tight-lipped in a world that is so gloomy? May the Lord forgive us for tampering with the very gospel which is the liberation to our lives and to the lives of men and women. Men and women today, with the changing notions of human wisdom, are like men and women trying to climb up ladders that have no rungs. Propped against cardboard frames, stretching up to nowhere.

And it is vital this morning that this gospel remains. Somebody sent me a catechism for children this past week. Tremendous thing.

It's a sort of abbreviation of the Westminster Catechism. I've begun to do it with my children. It just begins, who made you? God made me.

Did God make anything else? Yes, God made everything. Why did God make you? He made me so that I might glorify him. How can you glorify him? I can glorify him by trusting him and doing what he commands.

And so it goes on. You see, there is a great chance that in the midst of all our Sunday schools, and all our Bible classes, and all our tapes, and all our videos, and all our Christian songs and radio stations, that as moms and dads, we may very well be missing the crucial opportunity to take the truth of the gospel and pass it carefully from one hand into another hand that follows. Paul says, I was so concerned that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.

Let us beware of the subtle shifts of our generation to psychological theory, to political mandates. I find myself increasingly out on a limb as I say these things. But I am gravely concerned that we will find subsequent generations who ought to know better lying on couches with books of political theory, trying to pass them on to another generation who've discovered the hollow, empty nature of a gospel minus the Holy Spirit.

You see, you can change a man's mind in terms of a political agenda without the Holy Spirit. You can do psychology without the Holy Spirit. But a work of grace in the life of the unregenerate can only be done by God.

That's why it's so important. It's a question of orthodoxy. It's a matter of urgency.

And finally, what a picture of unity is provided for us. As you take these final verses of Galatians 2--that is, up to the tenth verse--you discover that the New Testament is not a hodgepodge of conflicting teachings, that it's not a kind of theological dog's breakfast with a little bit of this and a little bit of that thrown into it. And that was what these Judaizers were trying to say.

And indeed, that is what some in our day try and say, that the gospel, you can't really know it. After all, the Bible is so obscure, these issues are not very obvious, and so on. Let me tell you that any attempt to define the gospel in that way is either due to ignorance or is due to deception.

The men who are described in these verses wrote no less than twenty-one of the twenty-seven New Testament books. Think about that for a moment. The men whose names are listed here wrote at least twenty-one out of twenty-seven of the New Testament books.

And there is a notion that the author of Hebrews, who is never given to us, may have been Barnabas, in which case that was twenty-two out of the twenty-seven New Testament books. And so, what then of Paul's statement in verse 6 as for those who seem to be important? Is he being unkind? Is he being disrespectful to the other apostles? Not for a moment. What he is saying is this.

The Judaizers tried to exalt the importance of these individuals. Paul says, James and John and Peter are important to me. They're important in terms of their office.

They're not important in terms of their personality. And so, when you look at verses 7, 8, and 9, you find this lovely picture of unity. They saw, he said, that I got the chance to preach to the Gentiles.

Peter got the opportunity to preach to the Jews. Verse 8, God was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews. He was at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles.

James, Peter, and John, the pillars, gave Barnabas and I the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. Let me give you three phrases to wrap it up that describes this perfect unity. Number one, their hands were clasped.

Their hands were clasped. Verse 9, the right hand of fellowship. This handshake was not superficial.

It was a symbol of their agreement and an acknowledgement of their relationship. Yesterday, again in the wedding, at one point in the ceremony, I say to the couple, as a seal to the vows you're now about to make, will you give each other your right hand? And they turn and face one another and essentially shake hands. And in the summation of the marriage service, one of the phrases that is used to describe the fact of unity which has now been brought about is the phrase, and have declared the same by the joining of their hands.

By the joining of their hands. And our hands this morning need to be joined with all those who are proclaiming faithfully and fearlessly the gospel of God's grace. And we need to ask forgiveness when we keep our hands in our pockets, when they ought to be reached out in harmony.

So, their hands were clasped. Second, their heads were clear. They had clasped hands and clear heads.

In other words, their unity wasn't on the basis of cozy feelings or mushy thinking. If John Bunyan were to write Pilgrim's Progress now, some of the places that he would describe would have different names. And if I had a chance to write with him, I would have two by-path meadows.

One would be called Cozy Feelings, and the other would be called Mushy Thinkings. And these apostles did not unite on the coziness of their feelings or the mushiness of their minds. They united on the basis of truth.

It was an essential, and therefore there was unity. If it was a non-essential, then there would be liberty. And in all things, there would be charity.

So, their hands were clasped. Their heads were clear. And finally, their hearts were constrained by the same passion.

The thing that drove them all was simply this. The love of Christ compels us. That Christ died for one, therefore we want to make that perfectly clear.

And the impact of that truth was to be felt not only in the spiritual realm of man, but also in the physical realm. That's why in verse 10, they say that they asked us that we should continue to remember the poor. Genuine Christian love, magnified amongst the family of faith, must display itself in a concern for the poor.

Not simply their hearts, but their houses. The gospel must reach to the minorities. It must reach to the downtrodden, to the undernourished, to the underprivileged, to the refugee, to the homeless.

And one of the men whose hands were clasped with the rest was James, the brother of Jesus, who when he wrote his book said, What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith and has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, Go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. It's interesting, isn't it, that after nine verses that have to do with doctrinal truth, there is one verse that allows none of us to evade the pressing issues of our day.

And it is one of the great tragedies of evangelical Christianity over the time when there has been such a declension from truth that those who have wandered by way of vague philosophy and obscure theology from the truth of the gospel have, more times than not, been those who were most diligent in caring for the poor. While those of us who have exalted the place of doctrinal orthodoxy have wrapped ourselves in big, leather-bound Bibles and have failed to see that the expression of it is not simply spiritual with a concern for a never-dying soul, but it is physical with a concern for the life that God gave to that person. You see, the Bible is a really practical book.

It is this which touches our lives, it touches our homes, and it touches our worlds. It's relevant tomorrow as you go back to work. It's relevant as you go back home with your children.

It's relevant on the Lord's day, if we might call it the Lord's day anymore, whether we're just going to fill it the same as the other six days of the week. We don't have time to categorize our children anymore. One, because we're too busy.

And two, because we abuse the one day that God has given. Somebody gave me a quote from Stonewall Jackson. You know Stonewall Jackson? He was famous around here, I believe.

I read a letter that he wrote to one of the senators in his generation, and he wrote to say to the senator, vote against the passage of mail on the Lord's day. He said, for all my life I have managed without sending letters on the Lord's day. He said, vote against it.

He said this, the future of this great nation is going to be directly related to our obedience to the commands of God. If we fail in small issues, apparently, such as this, who knows the end to which our nation will come. Now, think it out, loved ones.

Either Stonewall Jackson was right then, and he would be right today, because God hasn't changed, and his law hasn't changed in the intervening 200 years. Or he was wrong then, and he would be wrong today. But you know what? If he was right then, then it is no surprise that today we live in a post-Christian era, because we decided that God's Word could be tampered with in those marginal areas.

After all, he won't miss one out of ten, will he? Well, has he? Does he? It's a question of orthodoxy. It's a matter of urgency. And God calls for us to be recreating pictures of perfect unity, not at the expense of truth, but on the basis of truth.

And I say to you again this morning, upon these issues rest our spiritual lives, our families, our nation, and our world. Neglect them at your peril. Shall we pray together? In the quietness of these final moments, let's just ask the Lord to take His Word and bring it to our minds where it comes most forcibly in application.

This is not some dead material as dad's, perhaps, to say, God, help me again to be the spiritual leader in my home, to take initiative. I know how easy it is to opt out and to fail. And in the positions of responsibility that God has given us in our world, in the marketplaces of our days, let's not be ashamed of the gospel.

It's the power of God unto salvation. Father, we thank you for your Word, and we pray that you will take it and write it in our lives, that we might be different. We thank you for one another, and we pray that as a church family we might grow in our understanding of your grace and your mercy, the freedom which is ours in Christ, that we might not, having begun by the Spirit, seek to live the rest of our life in the flesh.

Help us to encourage one another. Clasp our hands, Father, clear our minds, and unite our hearts, and may grace, mercy, and peace from the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be the portion of all who believe, today and forevermore. Amen.

That concludes this message. Thanks for listening to Truth For Life. If you'd like information on ordering additional messages from Alistair Begg and Truth For Life, then call our resource line at 1-888-58-TRUTH, write to us at Post Office Box 39-8000, Cleveland, OH 44139, or visit us online at truthforlife.org. Truth For Life, where the learning is for living.

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