

Text: Gal. 1:6-9

Title: "The nature of a false gospel"

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Introduction: Ruth Sheehan was the reporter for the Raleigh, NC newspaper, *The News & Observer*, who on April 24, 2007 published a personal apology to the Duke lacrosse team. 13 months earlier, Sheehan had published a widely read article that accused the team of covering up for some of its members who, she believed, committed the crime of sexual assault. That article was quickly followed by a second one calling for the firing of the team's coach.

Today, of course, we know that the team members, though now much better educated about how sowing sin can reap a whirlwind, had never committed the crime that they were accused of. Sheehan also gave an interview to ESPN in which she explained that she had been sexually assaulted in college and how that experience had affected her ability to report on the case objectively.

In the end, the Duke players lost their 2007 season, which was canceled; their coach lost his job and the program he had spent 12 years tirelessly building; three young men and their families were threatened with life prison sentences after enduring a publicized witch hunt with their team; the district attorney prosecuting the case was disbarred and convicted of a crime for which he spent a day in jail; the investigating officer on the case has since committed suicide; and the alleged victim whose testimony was false is today serving a 12-year prison sentence for murdering her boyfriend.

That is the true story of a false testimony bolstered by a false accusation publicized by false news reports. Falsehoods are damaging things.

Paul believed falsehood was especially damaging when it comes to the gospel. Last week, we saw that he begins this epistle by establishing for his readers what the true gospel is like – the nature of the true gospel.

The true gospel was preached by Paul, a true apostle whom we should love; it wishes mercy and peace on local churches; its content is the cross and the empty tomb, and how the Son of God saves sinners through those provable historical events; it saves from this present evil age, never needing to conform to it to be relevant in it; and it does so for the everlasting glory of God.

But without delaying any longer, Paul begins his warning against the false gospel, and in the four verses before us, he exposes the true nature of a false gospel. His rush to this topic without the normal pleasantries of thanksgivings and assurances of prayer is a unique and remarkable feature of Galatians.

I want us to see four things we learn about a false gospel in this passage this morning.

I. A false gospel is the result of a process of change (v. 6a; note the present tense – “being removed”).

Illustration: Evidence must not change between the time of a crime scene investigation and the trial by jury. Tampering with the evidence causes it to be thrown out. The temptation to tamper is the desire for a favorable outcome. It was that kind of thing that got the Durham DA disbarred.

Application: As Paul describes the problem of the false gospel, he speaks of movement (“you are . . . removed”). That movement was in the wrong direction (“from the one who called you in the grace of Christ”; whether Paul or the Lord who sent Paul, this is a move in the wrong direction); it was astonishingly fast (“I marvel that you are so soon”), and it was subtle enough to still be called *gospel* (“another gospel, which is not another”).

The word translated *removed* in this verse is a Greek form that can indicate either a passive idea, meaning that the Galatians were being changed by someone else, or a middle idea, meaning that the Galatians were changing their own opinions for themselves. Certainly, anytime believers are tempted to change their minds about the gospel, they are changing their own opinions, but they are also under the influence of an unseen deceptive enemy (2 Cor. 11:4, 13-15).

So Paul marveled that this process of change was happening so quickly, but when he saw it happen he was not surprised to find there the work of our adversary, Satan, the liar transformed into an angel of enlightenment and truth.

How tolerant are we of a false gospel? It is the enemy’s trick to create this tolerance for falsehood through a hidden process of change. Are we concerned about that?

Few journalists were concerned about the truth in their coverage of the Duke lacrosse team. They wanted a certain other story to be true. Have we succumbed to the same temptation when it comes to a false gospel? Perhaps we really want them to be true too, so we tolerate them rather than oppose them like the apostle Paul.

II. A false gospel is the opposite of the true gospel (v. 6b-7).

Application: Paul is very clear that what he is dealing with here in the Galatian churches is a perversion of the true gospel. In fact, the word translated *pervert* in verse 7 is actually a word that means *to change into the opposite*. It is used two other times in the NT – in Acts 2:20, where the sun is changed into darkness, its opposite, and in James 4:9, where laughter is changed into mourning, again its opposite.

The specifics of this change are given to us in the Acts 15 passage we read this morning. Paul speaks of those who trouble you in verse 7. That same idea is in Acts 15:24, “Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment.”

So the opposite of the true gospel was teaching everything that Paul taught about the importance of grace and faith and Christ, but then adding to that the requirement of circumcision and law keeping to be saved and stay saved.

Illustration: The Roman Catholic Church does the same thing today with their sacrament of “Holy Baptism,” especially of infants. Part two, section two, chapter one, article 1, para. 1213 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church says this about that sacrament: “Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit (*vitae spiritualis ianua*), and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. *Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word*” [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c1a1.htm; emphasis mine].

Application: What Paul is saying about additions like this to the true grace, faith, and Christ of salvation is that the formula yields the opposite of the true gospel.

Grace + the worthiness of a sinner to be saved is the opposite of grace alone.

Faith + the works or sacraments that a sinner must do is the opposite of faith alone.

Christ + the intercession a sinner needs from a sinless Mary is the opposite of Christ alone.

The gospel is that sinners are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. When we lose the *alone*, we wind up with the opposite of the true gospel, even though at some level we seem to still be taking about grace, faith, and Christ. Do we mention the *alone* in our gospel witness?

III. A false gospel is dangerous (vv. 8-9).

Illustration: Last week I shared the shocking news story about a Cleveland Clinic doctor who tweeted that she would give false medicine to Jewish patients to harm them. We readily see how a doctor like that can be dangerous. Surgeons scrub thoroughly before surgery, because to do less is dangerous for patients.

Application: Paul is doing some gospel-ministry scrubbing in this passage. It is not the apostles or the church that gives us the gospel, but the gospel who gives us them – so no matter who proclaims a false gospel, it is dangerous (contrast Roman Catholicism). The danger is both a serious danger and a very real and present danger.

(1) He tells the Galatians that a false gospel is a serious danger. He uses the word *anathema* (KJV: “accursed”), which he defines for us in Rom. 9:3, “For I could wish that I myself were accursed (anathema), separated from Christ for the

sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (NASB). The idea of *anathema* is the next phrase – to be separated forever from Christ. In Romans 9, Paul’s love for souls offers an anathema on himself if only fellow Jews could be saved in Christ. Here that same love for souls pronounces that same anathema on those who damn souls with a false gospel. It is a dangerous error.

(2) He tells the Galatians that a false gospel is a real and present danger. We can see his emphasis in the repetition of these verses. In Greek, we can see that he changes from a 3rd class condition in verse 8 to a 1st class condition in verse 9. We can translate the verses this way: “But even if we-ourselves, or an angel from heaven, should gospel-preach to you [anything] besides that which we have gospel-preached to you, let him be anathema. As I have said before, so now again I am saying, since someone is gospel-preaching you [something] besides that which you received, let him be accursed.”

Brothers and sister, this is happening today, and it is happening close to home – within professing Christendom. How should we treat someone who calls himself a Christian pastor but who perverts the gospel? We should treat him as someone who is spiritually dangerous. Someone against whose teachings we must warn constantly warn. In our work of gospel ministry as a church, we separate from these pastors, for they are separated from Christ.

IV. A false gospel is a breach in trust (v. 9).

Illustration: When the reporter I mentioned earlier published her apology to the lacrosse team, she did so because she knew that she had breached an important trust. The mission statement of *The News & Observer* begins this way:

“The News & Observer, while continuously created every day, is built on a set of unchanging beliefs. As a news organization, we value accuracy, fairness and freedom of speech.”

Application: Our church is a good-news organization. We are the God-designed entity for the ministry of the gospel in our day. That is what the Lord has entrusted to us. How much more important is it for us to value accuracy, fairness, and freedom of speech?

The word in verse 9 for *receive* is the word that is used for the action of someone on the receiving end of something handed over. Together, this handing over and this receiving form a God-designed gospel chain that must not be broken (see 1 Cor. 15:3 and v. 12). The gospel is handed over to us so that we can hand it over to others in need and to the generations who come behind us.

We have a gospel trust, and tolerance for a false gospel is a breach in that trust. More today are ignorant of the true gospel than in our grand-parents day, because in between many have tolerated a false gospel with the hope of accomplishing some other good – win elections, change laws, keep the organization financially sound, even reach more people with the true gospel. All such tolerance with a false gospel is a breach in a trust the Lord has given to local churches like ours. The gospel chain is only as strong as its weakest link.

Conclusion: To have the heart of Paul in the matter of the nature of the false gospel today is to be a fundamentalist and a separatist. That all the world wants to be something other than this is really nothing new. For Paul, his love for

souls and allegiance to the Savior gave him courage enough to expose the real nature of false gospels. Will ours?

“A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction – the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching