

**SI:** This is a sermon series on the Gospel. Gospel means good news. The good news is that God himself, because of his great love, has intervened in this fallen world to save us from our sins through the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We’ve been looking at different facets of the Gospel in Scripture. This morning let’s look at a threat and challenge to the Gospel.

**INTRO:** There are some name brands that are so successful they’ve become synonymous with the product itself—like Kleenex or Band Aids.

I read an article about how those brands advertise. It said they urge consumers to shop carefully, using phrases like “Insist on the original,” “Often imitated, never duplicated” and “Accept no substitutes.” Such ads often appear during times of recession or inflation, when shoppers are tempted to buy a look-alike that usually costs less than the name brand that defined a product category.

It gave some examples. More than 50 years ago, Kellogg had an ad that said:

“Don’t be corn-fused! When you get cornflakes, get the real Corn Flakes. Get Kellogg’s Corn Flakes!”

Ora-Ida, the frozen food company, recently had an ad campaign for Tater Tots that warned shoppers against buying “Imi-Taters.”

The video commercial showed off-brand frozen potato nuggets in various disguises, like wigs and moustaches and sunglasses trying to pass themselves off as good enough to be genuine Ore-Ida Tater Tots.

I’m sure those were some funny advertisements.

But in the letter to the Galatians when the Apostle Paul dealt with imitations, he was not laughing. He was angry and upset.

This is the strongest language he uses in any of his letters.

I am astonished you’re believing this, he tells them.

Even if I or an angel from heaven preached this stuff, let him be eternally condemned, forever cursed, anathema.

In chapter 3 he says: You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you?!

What was it they were listening to and believing that bothered Paul so much?

It was something he called a different gospel or another gospel.

Not because it actually was good news, but because that’s how it was presenting

itself. It was another message, different from what Paul and the Apostles originally proclaimed about Jesus Christ.

But it had enough similarities that it was riding on the coattails of the real thing. Paul strongly rejects this alternative gospel and spends the whole letter reminding the Galatian Christians about the real thing.

Did you know that Galatians is Paul's first letter and the oldest New Testament book? Since Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are first in the New Testament, and since they are about the life of Christ, we tend to think they were written first. But they weren't. Paul's letters are the earliest New Testament documents. Galatians was written about 55 AD.

So think about the implications of that.

In the very earliest days of the Christian church, imitation gospels were already showing up and they were actually appealing to some Christians.

From the time of the apostles themselves, the church and Christian people have been challenged by and even attracted to imitation gospels.

This has been happening over and over through church history right up to the present day.

So part of understanding the Gospel and believing it means knowing this history, and knowing about imitation gospels so you're aware and aren't sucked in.

Let's look at this under three points:

1. The content of other gospels
2. The appeal of other gospels
3. The detection and avoidance of other gospels

## **MP#1 The content of other gospels**

Let's look briefly at some other gospels from past history and our own time and see if we can spot some similarities in content.

The other gospel that Paul dealt with in Galatians had a Jewish origin.

The people who promoted it have been called the Judaizers.

That's not what they called themselves, but it's a name scholars have used.

The Judaizers did not deny Jesus' incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.

They took the story of Jesus and they combined it with the requirement to keep particular Old Testament Jewish ceremonies, like circumcision.

So their gospel, their good news, was that your sins are forgiven and you are made right with God by believing in Jesus and performing these ceremonies.

Paul says over and over in Galatians—No, that's not good news, that you have to fulfill these ceremonies and keep these laws to be saved.

Because the law becomes a condemning weight you will never keep perfectly.

The real good news is that Jesus kept the law and fulfilled the ceremonies for us and we are saved by faith in him alone, not by our works, not by obeying the law.

Fast forward a hundred years or so and there was another gospel that made inroads in the church. It was called Christian Gnosticism.

Gnosticism had its origin not in Judaism but in Greco-Roman philosophy.

It even had its own books about Jesus that were named for some of the apostles.

*The Gospel of Thomas, and The Gospel of Philip* are two examples.

But weren't actually written by those apostles, written long after their deaths.

These gospels don't tell anything about Jesus' death and resurrection.

They present Jesus as a teacher of mysterious truths.

The good news this Jesus supposedly teaches is that if you look deep within

yourself and follow certain practices of self-discipline, you can loose yourself and find salvation—very Eastern

Not only was Gnosticism and the Gospel of Thomas not good news, it was actually bad news for half the human race.

Because it taught that in order for women to be saved they had to first become men.

That's actually bad news for everybody. A world populated only by men!

Let's jump to our own day.

There are many so-called Christian preachers whose gospel is a message of physical health and material wealth through faith in Jesus Christ.

It's called word-faith theology, health and wealth gospel and it's mostly found

in churches and denominations of the Pentecostal tradition.  
Huge numbers of Christians have been taken in by this message, even though most of the wealth is accumulated by the preachers themselves.  
Give \$1000 in faith, claim God's promises, and you will become a millionaire.  
This other gospel started in the United States but it has become entrenched in churches in Africa and India and Central and South America.  
But anyone can read the Bible and see this is not the good news Jesus proclaimed.  
Jesus actually warns his followers not to be surprised by fiery trials.  
He says that in this life there will be tribulation.

A little closer to us is the gospel of liberal Protestantism.  
This teaching has made inroads in all mainline Protestant denominations to some degree. It has dominated much of American Presbyterianism.  
It teaches a message of salvation through political and social activism.  
As Christians and the church adopt and bring about social change, then God's kingdom comes to earth.  
Liberalism says Christ's incarnation and resurrection and all the other supernatural events in the Bible are not history, but are metaphors for how we are to live.  
Through the resurrection, we bring new life and ideas to society, that sort of thing.  
God's law, God's wrath, sin, hell, substitutionary death—icky and embarrassing.  
If you're a good, socially aware person then you get to heaven along with all the other good people of every other religion, or of no religion.

And there have been many other gospels preached in the church through ages.  
What do they all have in common?  
It's hard to say at first because they are so different in their emphasis and spirit.  
The gospel of Judaizers is very different from the gospel of Protestant liberalism.  
One was supernatural and emphasized laws and ceremonies,  
the other was/is anti-supernatural and emphasizes holding correct political views.  
Christian Gnosticism had a disdain for the material world and wealth, which is opposite from the health and wealth gospel which worships materialism.

But there is something that they have in common, and you've probably already identified it. In some way they all downplay or replace or add to Christ's work.  
Jesus saved us through his great works in history, through his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.  
We are connected to him and receive the benefits of his work by faith alone.  
All other gospels say that you don't need just that, here's something else.  
So that leads us to a curious question: Why are these other gospels appealing?  
The true Gospel is amazing, wonderful good news of Jesus Christ doing everything

for us and giving us the gift of eternal life by faith.

What's the appeal of messing with that?

Especially replacing it with something so predictable and uninspiring and so obviously self-serving?

Let's ponder . . .

## **MP#2 The appeal of other gospels**

One appeal is obviously human pride.

The gospel requires you to acknowledge your sinfulness and your desperate need for what God alone can give you.

That's too much for many people to admit about themselves.

The reason Christian Gnosticism was so appealing and the reason theological liberalism is so appealing as gospels is that they both downplay personal sin.

So you can have a high view of yourself and remain a Christian.

Works oriented gospels like the Judaizers also appeals to pride.

It's salvation by pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.

If you keep the rules you can feel good about yourself.

So that's a big appeal. Other gospels in various ways appeal to human pride and our default position of thinking very highly of ourselves.

But I think there's a more profound reason other gospels appeal.

It's because they all promise something that the true Gospel never promises.

An uncomplicated life. An easy life. A comfortable life.

That's what everybody is looking for.

Why is the prosperity gospel so appealing? Because wealth promises to make your life easier and more comfortable.

But the Gospel promises to make your life harder and more complicated.

Tim Keller puts it this way.

Before you become a Christian you are at war with God and at peace with yourself.

After you become a Christian you are at peace with God and at war with yourself.

I know I read you something long last Sunday. Sorry, I'm going to do it again.

This is from Rosaria Butterfield's spiritual autobiography.

It's called *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*.

Let me read to you how the gospel made her life harder and more complicated.

In April 1999, at the age of 36, I was an associate professor at Syracuse University, recently tenured in the English Department, also holding a joint teaching appointment in the Center for Women's Studies. I was in a lesbian relationship with a woman who was primarily an animal

activist and also an adjunct professor at a neighboring university. Together we owned homes, cohabiting both in life and in the university's domestic partnership policy. Our houses (we owned and lived in two—one in the country and one in the university district) were hubs of intellectual and activist work. My historical field in English studies was 19<sup>th</sup> century literature. My historical interests were grounded in the philosophical and political worldviews of Freud, Marx, and Darwin. My specialty was Queer Theory, a postmodern form of gay and lesbian studies.

She was also the faculty advisor for English Department graduate students and for the LGBT student organization. And she was proud of what she had accomplished and comfortable in her life. I won't tell you how she came to faith in Christ.

Her experience was very different from the story I read you last week.

It wasn't a sudden conversion. It took three years for her to come to faith. But when she did, it caused so many problems in her life.

How do I tell you about my conversion to Christianity without making it sound like an alien abduction or a train wreck. Truth be told, it felt like a little of both . . . . When I became a Christian, I had to change everything—my life, my friends, my writing, my teaching, my advising, my clothes, my speech, my thoughts. I was tenured in a field I could no longer work in. I was the faculty advisor to all the gay and lesbian and feminist groups on campus. I was writing a book I no longer believed in. And, I was scheduled in a few months to give the incoming address to all of Syracuse University's graduate students. What in the world would I say to them? The lecture I had written and planned to deliver—on Queer Theory—I threw in the trash. Thousands of new students would hear my first, fledgling attempts to speak about Christian hermeneutics at a postmodern university. I was flooded with doubt about my new life in Christ. Was I willing to be considered stupid by those who didn't know Jesus? Peter, after being beaten for preaching the gospel, rejoiced that he was counted worthy to suffer shame for Christ's name. To the world this is masochism. To the Christian, this is freedom. Did I really believe this? Do I really believe this today? . . . . Conversion put me in a complicated and comprehensive chaos.

Before Rosaria believed the gospel she was at peace with herself, she was proud of her life and her beliefs and accomplishments, and she was at war with God.

She said no to God's authority, God's truth, God's morality.

Then she believed the good news and she was at peace with God and at war with herself. That's what the Gospel does.

It saves you and then it begins to challenge and change you.

Other gospels don't do that.

They all, in some way, take away that edge, so you can still be ok with yourself the way you are, and just add Jesus and God to the mix in some way.

The gospel of theological liberalism would have told her that there was conflict

with her ideology and her morality and Christianity.  
She could keep all that and add the Bible as a metaphorical inspiration and the comforting worship rituals of the church.  
So it is with all other gospels. The prosperity gospel lets you love God and money.  
Legalistic gospels let you keep your judgmental superiority over other people.  
There are greatly appealing in various ways.

So how do we deal with them? Let's talk about  
**MP#3 The detection and avoidance of other gospels**

Did you notice the seriousness of Paul's tone?

As you read through other letters he expresses strong emotions, but not like this.  
Other doctrinal matters he addresses in letters,  
matters of Christian misconduct, he never speaks this way.  
He urges and pleads, warns. But not like this.

If I or an angel should preach another gospel, Let him be eternally condemned.  
I say it again. If anyone preaches another gospel, let him be eternally condemned.  
Martin Luther said: "Here Paul is breathing fire."  
Get the Gospel wrong and it means people go to hell, no matter how religious or sincere they may be, because getting the Gospel wrong means turning away from Jesus Christ who is the only Savior of the world.  
The Gospel is essential to our eternal well being. A matter of first importance.

I want to focus on Paul's first words:

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you."  
We could talk about how this applies to individuals—how some desert Christ.  
But Paul wrote that to the churches in Galatia. Let's consider this as a church letter.

These churches heard Paul and Barnabas preach.

They saw miracles performed.

Word of Jesus came with power and changed lives.

How could it be that they turn away so quickly.

Embrace something, not just a little goofy but something that struck at the vitals of what they believed at first?

There is a warning here.

Good churches that love Jesus, teach Gospel, can very quickly desert Him.  
Where will we be as a church 5 years from now? 10 years from now?  
If the churches that heard the apostles themselves preach with miracles could turn away, Christ Covenant could too.  
So, are we just sitting ducks?

Not at all. That's why Holy Spirit preserved this letter.  
Paul doesn't say: It's inevitable and dust his hands off.

No, he brings them back to the Gospel.

Shows them the wonderful freedom they have in Christ.

Shows them the glory of justification by faith.

Shows them the errors of false gospels and how those enslave.

Wants them to know the Gospel, have such a taste for it—  
that they are able to tell when something is not right.

We need a church full of people so attuned to genuine Gospel they can smell a rat.  
Might not even know what it is right away.

Something in my church is taking glory away from Jesus Christ.

Something in my church sounds like a religious program to get to God not faith.

Something in my church is downplaying the hope of changed lives.

Something in my church displacing our absolute dependence on Jesus.

Sometimes the rat's in the pulpit.

The things taught and preached are not right.

Sometimes the official doctrine is fine and it says all the right things,  
but the rat's in the spirit of the place.

Spirit is one that subtly diminishes Jesus and elevates something else.

It may even be a good thing—probably will be a good thing—

but even best things can ruin a church, if come between worshipper and Christ.

Need people who smell these things because so attuned to aroma of Gospel.

Do you obey God and as a result He loves you? OR

Does God love you and thereby enable you to love and obey Him?

Do you say: "Because I'm being a good person, I am acceptable to God." OR

Reason I'm able to be a good person, because I am already accepted by God."

Do you say: "I have to repent or God will reject me and I'll fall from grace." OR

I have to repent because God won't reject me and I can't fall from grace.

How can I grieve the person who at infinite cost saved me from my sins?

Anything but Christ alone. Any addition. Any program. Not Gospel.

Don't be corn-fused! Don't accept imi-taters!

Luther: No middle ground between Christian righteousness/works righteousness.

In Christ alone, our hope is found!