
Quickly Deserting and Turning to a Different Gospel

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**A sermon by the Rev. Wallace Marsh
Canon for Congregational Life**

It always happens. It can be at the ballpark, the gym, the beach or pool, a cocktail party, the grocery store or on the plane. Whenever someone discovers that I am a priest, they are ready to unload their confessions. Sometimes it's about why they don't go to church. Other times it's about a pressing theological issue, or my thoughts about something in the news. And there are the rare occasions that they confess a wild college story—those can be quite entertaining!

But the confessions I typically get are what they like or dislike about their priest or pastor's Sunday sermon. After they file their complaints, they end the conversation by offering their unsolicited preaching advice: (1) Make sure the congregation walks away with a clear message, and (2) Make sure you give them something to think about or something to do Monday through Saturday.

So here it is. I am going to fulfill those two points at the beginning of today's sermon instead of waiting until the end. Are you ready for it? The message of today's sermon: why are we quickly deserting and turning to a different gospel? And here is the second part: your task this week is to read Paul's letter to the Galatians.

For those of you who haven't read Galatians, the letter is only six chapters long and can easily be read over a cup of coffee. As some of you know, five weeks ago my life changed when I became a father. And one of the ways it has changed is that I have been getting up earlier than normal, way earlier than my alarm clock! A few days ago I decided to use that time to reread Galatians, so I am 100% certain you can complete this letter in the amount of time it takes you to finish a cup of coffee, or the amount of time it takes a baby to finish his bottle. That is good news!

But there is better news! If you hang around here the next five Sundays you will hear readings of important sections of this letter. Today kicks off six weeks of reading Paul's letter to the Galatians.

My sermon this morning is going to take a different form than normal. What I would like to do is get you excited about reading Galatians this week and to prepare you for what you will be hearing the next five Sundays.

If you turn to your lesson leaflet, you see that today's epistle is the first twelve verses of the letter. And if you are familiar with St. Paul, you recognize that the letter opens with the typical Pauline structure; however, the tone of this letter is quite different than other letters. What do I mean by that? Well, if you aren't familiar with St. Paul, or it has been a while since you studied the Pauline letters, allow me to digress and read the opening verses from Philippians, one of my favorite letters. (By the way, if Galatians can be read over a cup of coffee, at only four chapters, Philippians can be read over a half cup of coffee.)

Listen to some phrases from the opening of Philippians—"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, thankful for your partnership in the gospel, I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace." Now, let's look at some phrases from the opening lines of Galatians—"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you." "If

any one proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed." (Paul says this twice). The contrast is clear"Philippians opens with joy, love and thanksgiving. Galatians opens with accusations of deserting and a whole lot of cursing!

Why is Paul so angry? Here is the quick version: Paul was an apostle, sent by Jesus Christ, and worked hard to bring the gospel and build the church in Galatia. It appears as though someone came after Paul, claiming that Paul's message was in error, and that if these Gentile Galatians wanted to be "real Christians," they needed to accept Torah and get circumcised. This infuriates Paul, as you can see in the opening lines. Paul tells the Galatians that it isn't circumcision; rather it is "faith in Christ" that makes you a "real Christian."

Paul tells the Galatians they don't need to be circumcised and they shouldn't be listening to these new preachers. Paul is so angry that in Galatians 5:12, he wishes these preachers would have a slip of the knife when they circumcised each other. (As you might imagine, on June 30 our lectionary will carefully skip over that verse).

Time and time again (week in and week out for these next few weeks), Paul is going to remind the Galatians not to desert the gospel but to keep their faith"believing that the God who raised Jesus from the dead is faithful and leading us into a new way of life!

Now, as 21st century Christians reading this letter you are probably asking yourself, what is this fuss really all about? What does any of this have to do with my faith? What does any of it have to do with my life? As I was preparing for this sermon, Mary Hinkle Shore, a Professor of New Testament, offered a wonderful image to help us understand what was going on at the church in Galatia and what it means for us today.

Imagine that you are at the airport (not in Atlanta). You pick up your luggage and you are ready to rent a car. You go up to the car rental desk and you are expecting to rent a car that has a little more horsepower than a golf cart (I am speaking from personal experience). Instead of being handed the keys to that car, imagine you are given the keys to a Porsche. You walk to the car, open up the door, crank up the Porsche and start making your way through the parking lot. You drive up to the security gate, they scan your receipt, the gate opens, the road spikes drop down, and you turn on Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Free Bird" and drive off into the sunset.

Paul has given the church at Galatia the car (gospel). He tells the Galatians Christ has gotten them through the gate and off the parking lot, and they even have "Free Bird" on the radio. (I am serious, because on June 30 we will hear Paul remind the Galatians "for freedom Christ has set us free." "Free Bird" is on the radio!)

Now this is important: The reason Paul is so angry in this letter is that instead of riding off into the sunset, the Galatians have listened to these other preachers, and they are about to put the car in reverse, back over the road spikes, blow out the tires, and remain spiritually stagnant in the parking lot! Back to Paul's letter"the Galatians are quickly deserting the gospel!

Why would they do such a thing you might ask? Why would they quickly desert the gospel? Why would they regress? Let's not throw stones because we do it all the time!

At some point in our lives, we have all wanted to put the car in reverse and drive back on the lot. Why? Because there is safety on the lot"you have got road spikes, security gates, cameras, you know who should be in and who should be out. Spiritually, it is a really easy place to live. We can control things in our spiritual parking lots. We conform the gospel to our lives. In doing this, we turn to a different gospel.

I don't know about you, but I can recall moments of faith where I left that lot and allowed God to lead me to some wonderful and difficult places. Driving off the lot and taking those leaps of faith were moments that have changed my life. Unfortunately, I can recall many moments where I quickly deserted the gospel, by putting the car in reverse and staying in the parking lot. And this morning, I don't imagine that you like asking yourself this question any more than I do"where do you spend most of your spiritual life? Are you on the road (faithfully following) or do you spend your days backing the car up and sitting in the parking lot? This is at the heart of what is going on in Galatia!

One of the things that Paul emphasizes (a few times) in these opening verses is something that will help you understand

this letter. Paul says that he is an "apostle." The word apostle means to be "sent out." He is sent out to share the gospel, the "good news of Jesus Christ." You can't be sent out, you can't spread the good news, you can't experience the phrase "for freedom Christ has set you free," if you live your spiritual life in the parking lot!

Paul tells the Galatians (and us this morning) to stop deserting the gospel and to have faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead!

As you read Galatians at home this week, and as you hear it read these next few weeks at church, you will hear Paul ask us to be *people of faith*. And here is why that is important: Paul says people of faith are people who live in the Spirit, and people who live by the Spirit, are ultimately people whose lives are guided by the Spirit. Instead of quickly deserting the gospel, let us claim our faith, let us live and let our lives be guided by the Spirit. AMEN.