

The Test

A Series on the Letter to the Galatians

Message 1 – “The Test”

Galatians 1:1-12

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—² and all the members of God’s family who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. ~

Galatians 1:1-5

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Good morning! My name is David Woolverton and I’m one of the pastors here at St. Paul’s Church and it’s my joy to share with you God’s Word today. As we prepare ourselves, would you please join me in prayer... Lord, open us up to Your Word and open Your Word up to us. Teach us what You would have us learn as You conform our lives into the disciples that You have called us to be. In Jesus’s Name. Amen.

Do you remember taking tests in school. . . all of the anxiety, the stress, the cramming? Were there times when you were tempted to cheat because you just didn’t prepare? And then there were the “pop quizzes” – the ones that the teacher would pull on you without warning. What were they thinking, right? I hated those quizzes. It meant that I always had to be prepared! I always preferred a little warning. Like my high school calculus teacher, Mr. Ahn. He was such a great teacher. Hard as anything, but what a great teacher. He would teach the concept and then he would tell us, “Study this tonight,” he would say, “because tomorrow you will have an unannounced pop quiz.”

I also remember forgetting about a test and coming into class to discover that I had not studied. You have to understand... I was a great student. Very conscientious and very responsible. But I was not prepared for that test at all. When the teacher started the class, he said, “Alright, I hope you all prepared...” and he handed out the test paper. My stomach dropped.

You know that feeling? I bombed that test. First time in my life that I failed a test. It made me sick.

You know, tests always intrigued me. Because I was a good student, I always wanted to do well on the test – certainly to get a good grade (because I competed with myself to always improve), but also because I loved learning. I still do. But tests were intriguing to me because here you have a teacher that’s trying to get the information across to the students and during the test itself, when the students need help the most, the teacher is silent.

In fact, recently I heard someone say it this way: “The teacher is always silent during the test.”

Tests are about learning – so why during the test is the teacher silent?

Then after the test is graded, that’s when the teacher speaks again. Sometimes sharing good stuff – like how she was proud of us in how we did on the test, but always she points out what we missed, what we need to do better – to get the main items that we’re supposed to learn. Why are we supposed to learn what our teachers are teaching us? Mostly, it’s because our life in the real world will depend on us getting it.

Do we get the basics?

The apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians is a test paper given back to those early Christians with the teacher, Paul’s grade on it. What we read is that they failed the test. And the teacher, Paul, is going back over the basics once again so that they have the best possible chance at becoming all that God created them to be.

Why is this important to us today? I believe that we’re facing a test right now. Some of us are asking, “Why is God so silent in the midst of this pandemic, in the midst of the racial tensions and in the face of racial injustices, in the midst of the polarization we’re experiencing as a nation?”

If Galatians has anything to teach us, it’s that the teacher—in this case, God—is silent *during* the test. I think Jesus is wondering how we’re doing in learning the basics in what it means to be His disciples.

What are the basics that God has been trying to teach us? In Galatians chapter 1 there are three of those basics. Before I share them with you today, I want to give you just a little bit of background.

The New Testament letter to the Galatians was written around 48-49 AD to a group of new believers in the region of Galatia – in Asia Minor – many of whom were Jewish in background prior to them giving their lives to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Many of them, however, were starting to go back to the old religious ways and they were looking to the Jewish Law and its rituals to earn them salvation. They began to work harder within those old religious systems believing that somehow that would give them greater access to God. And then, as Gentile converts started joining the Church, they were being forced to adopt those old religious systems as part of their experience of salvation.

Paul, who had planted this church, heard about what was going on and how they were changing the gospel message with old religious practices – and he was angry. As he starts off this letter, he jumps right into his teacher-mode as he tells his class that they failed their test. Look at what he says in verses 6-7:

*<sup>6</sup> I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel —<sup>7</sup> which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.*  
**(Galatians 1:6-7)**

Here, in verse 7, we begin to see the problem. There was a group of people called the Judaizers that believed that Jesus was a good man, but that He really wasn't good enough, that his death on the Cross only covered part of the sins of humanity, but not all of it, and that to truly be saved, people had to conform to the Law of Moses (the Jewish law) – especially the rituals of circumcision—in order to truly be saved. Paul called that a "perversion" of the gospel. It was Jesus PLUS something and that just wasn't the gospel that Paul taught. And the Galatian Christians were apparently believing these Judaizers, and "deserting" the message of new life that Paul had taught them.

He then goes on to tell the Galatian Christians that the gospel that he preached to them, the gospel that they originally gave their life to, had divine origin. In verse 11-12, he tells them that he "*received it by revelation from Jesus Christ,*" and therefore it can be trusted, even as *he* could be trusted. He then goes on to use the radical nature of his own conversion as an illustration of the power of that gospel, and of the saving grace of Jesus.

Many of you know that story of Paul's conversion. We read about it Acts 9. Paul was a Pharisee – a religious leader and zealous for the ways of God. He

saw this movement of Jesus followers as a threat to Judaism and as blasphemous to God—so he avidly persecuted Christians, even pursuing after them to arrest them and bring them under judgment. But one day, on the road to Damascus, with orders in his hand to hunt down more Christians, he had an encounter with the Risen Jesus that radically changed his life. Here in Galatians chapter 1, Paul tells how that encounter with Jesus so radically changed his life that it caused him to start preaching the good news, inviting even Gentiles into the house of faith... and that such a powerful gospel can most certainly be trusted. Look at verses 23-24...

*<sup>23</sup> They only heard the report: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." <sup>24</sup> And they praised God because of me. (Galatians 1:23-24)*

But before he gives all of that background, in true teacher fashion, Paul lays out what he really wanted the Galatians to hear. All the way back at the beginning of the letter. It was the first thing that the teacher would say after handing out the graded test papers. The class would be looking at their "F" at the top of their papers and they would hear Paul say:

*<sup>3</sup> Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>4</sup> who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, <sup>5</sup> to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Galatians 1:3-5)*

So, Paul reminds them of what he had been teaching them all along. The basics. And they're found in the words that he carefully selected. What are those basics?

**Basic #1: A relationship with Jesus is the ONLY way. Religion won't cut it. Nothing else will either.**

Look at the word "Grace." It is a word that describes unmerited favor. Our salvation, Paul would say later in this letter, is by grace alone, received through faith in Jesus Christ. Our salvation is not dependent on any works of the law. In fact, it's not dependent on anything that we would do, but only on what Jesus did for us on the Cross. Paul says in Galatians, that lives changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ are the greatest evidence of its truth. Religion would not work. Jesus set Paul free. Jesus can set you free too.

**Basic #2: Genuine love sacrifices.** Look at those verses again...

<sup>3</sup> *Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>4</sup> **who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father...***

A true test of whether you love someone is “what are you willing to give up in order to lift up that other person?” If there is no willingness to sacrifice, there’s really no love.

So, here’s the thing... Paul says to the Galatians, “*Jesus gave himself... [in order] to rescue us from the present evil age.*” Everything about the Christian faith is rooted in what Jesus did on the Cross and what God did in raising Him from the dead. Without that self-sacrificial act of love and grace, there is no gospel. There is no “good news.” Jesus gave himself to rescue us.

Jesus himself even tells us that this was his plan all along. In Mark 10:45 we read...

<sup>45</sup> *For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45)*

Genuine love sacrifices. As followers of Jesus, we need to be willing to do the same thing. What are you willing to give up in order to lift up another person?

**Basic #3: Forgiveness substitutes the Cross for pain.** One more time, let’s look at verse 4...

<sup>4</sup> ***who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father...*** (Galatians 1:4)

Notice the words “for our sins.” Jesus gave himself for *our* sins. Not only was the Cross God’s way of reconnecting our hearts to His, but it also was a model for us in how we are to forgive one another. Genuine forgiveness within our relationships with one another is discovered when we realize that at the foot of the Cross of Christ, we’re all equal in our need for God’s grace. No one is more righteous, no one is less. No one is more deserving, no one can rack up points of favor with God. Forgiveness substitutes the Cross of Christ for the pain we feel in our broken relationships with one another. For followers of Jesus, there’s no other way. Forgiveness – as hard as it is sometimes – is central, because the Cross is central.

So, what Paul is saying to the Galatians is – Jesus is the ONLY way, that His genuine, powerful love for us sacrificed everything, and that He did it so that we would know the intimacy of a forgiven relationship with God and with one another. So, Paul says to them, why on earth would you want to leave all of that—the ultimate gift of life—in order to go back to trying to earn God’s love by old religious methods?

Look, the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah had the incredible job of giving a word of encouragement to the people of Israel while he informed them that they had failed their test with God. They had failed. Which meant that they were getting kicked out of the Promised Land and sent into exile in Babylon for what would be 70 years. On their way out, the teacher gives the people this piece of advice... in Jeremiah 6:16, he says...

*Stand at the crossroads and look. Ask for the ancient paths. Ask for the good way and walk in it and you will find rest for your soul*  
**(Jeremiah 6:16)**

You know, right now in our nation... in our world... we’re in the midst of a test. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to fail this test. Right now, you and I as followers of Jesus – we have all that we need to pass this test. This is not an education issue. It’s an application issue.

There’s a lot of things that have been happening that can make some of us angry, or cause some of us to become reactive. It can be very easy for us to forget who we are, why we’re here and where we’re going. And to some degree, that’s what the test is all about – to help us to integrate what we’ve been learning from God’s Word into our daily lives, into how we treat each other. If we truly believe that Jesus is the Way, then maybe we should be okay giving love away, or standing in the gap for those who are hurting, even if we don’t understand, or don’t quite agree, or don’t know what to do. How can we represent Jesus today?

The basics that Jesus has been trying to teach us:

1. Jesus is the ONLY way
2. Genuine love sacrifices
3. Forgiveness substitutes the Cross for pain

*Stand at the crossroads and look. Ask for the ancient paths. Ask for the good way and walk in it and you will find rest for your soul.*

The test is still going on. The teacher may still be silent while we take the test. He believes in us. Why not reach out to Jesus and take the first step?