

Last week we saw Paul and his companions finish what is known as the Apostle's First Missionary Journey. He and his friends had gone out proclaiming the Gospel through the Roman Provinces of Cyprus, Pamphylia, and Galatia, then they retraced their steps strengthening the new churches on their return trip to their home church in Syrian Antioch.

They reported everything to their church, meaning again, to the people of their local, sending church. They rejoined the Christians who had sent them as their representatives, and who had most directly supported them on their journey, spiritually, physically, and financially.

That local church family had enabled the ministry of Paul and Barnabas. The thousands of recipients of the Gospel in the areas that they covered owed their good fortune, in large part, to the generosity and commitment of the Antiochian church.

As I said last week, you are doing the same basic thing here and now. Your personal support of Alêtheia, spiritually, physically, and financially enable this ministry to exist. The souls saved and the souls strengthened through Alêtheia owe a debt to you.

Acts 15:1–5, 1Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” 2And after Paul and Barnabas had a heated argument and debate with them, the brothers determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. 3Therefore, after being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and they were bringing great joy to all the brothers and sisters. 4When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were received by the church, the apostles, and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. 5But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to keep the Law of Moses.”

We start with, “Some men came down from Judea,” which sounds odd to us, seeing as Antioch is well over 300 miles north of Jerusalem. For Jewish people everything was down from the Holy City of Jerusalem, regardless of the direction, or the change in elevation.

Remember the wealthy young Jewish Christian whose mother hosted the church in Jerusalem? You know, the dude named John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas? The guy we typically call Mark, for short, as in, the Gospel According to Mark. You know, the young man who was present at Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane and ended up running away naked as he himself recorded in Mark 14:51.

Remember that he was with Paul and Barnabas on the First Missionary Journey but deserted them after Paul preached the Gospel to Sergius Paulus, the Roman proconsul of Cyprus in the city of Paphos.

Remember also that Sergius Paulus, the Gentile (meaning thoroughly non-Jewish... ethnically, racially, genealogically, culturally, nationally, religiously, "Spiritually, ecumenically, grammatically," a non-Jew, therefore a Gentile), Roman governor of the island, believed the Word of the Lord.

He believed the Gospel proclaimed by the Apostle Paul and then, remember that it is almost certain that he begged the Apostles to go to his extended family living in Pisidian Antioch in the Roman Province of Galatia and preach the Good News to them? That was why

they went from Paphos to Pisidian Antioch when they could have gone anywhere else.

Remember finally, it was at that moment when Mark abandoned the Apostles and returned to Jerusalem straightaway. Mark went back to the Christian headquarters at the time and spilled the beans on what Paul was doing. When they heard, the more legalistic Jewish Believers in the Jerusalem church, were outraged.

Specifically, it was those of the “sect of the Pharisees who had believed,” who stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to keep the Law of Moses.” These devout, law-abiding Jews were convinced that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and that faith in Him was for the purpose of being better Jews, not for abandoning Judaism!

For them it was bad enough that Peter had brought a Gentile into the fold, but at least Cornelius the Centurion had already been a friend to the Jews and was a one-off, God proving a point, kind of deal. But for Paul, the former persecutor of the church and key player in the martyrdom of Stephen, to take the lead from Barnabas on their missionary journey and to

openly invite Gentiles to become Christians without first becoming Jewish... Well. it was too much, it was unconscionable. It was “a travesty, a sham, and a mockery – it was a trava-sham-mockery.”

Last Wednesday our group talked briefly about the cattiness of Christians. Anytime a Christian has what the world would consider some level of ministry success, the world doesn't rush in to tear it down, it doesn't need to, it has got other Christians for that. Christians who are eager to destroy what they consider the less than perfect doctrines, practices, beliefs, and efforts, of other Christians. You can literally Google any Christian ministry and find negative criticism of it from other Christians – including Alêtheia.

It is remarkable how easy it is for Satan's team to get Christians to harshly judge what other Christians are doing for the Lord. Jealousy over ministry success that was accomplished differently than the way you would do it, is precisely what led the religious leaders to murder Jesus. Nothing has changed.

These Christian Pharisees were incensed by the outcome of the Paul and Barnabas' ministry. They were so legalistic in their outlook, and so confident in their

ancestry, that they didn't know how to look at things differently. Concerning such people, Jesus said, "you cannot put new wine into old wineskins." I beg of you, my friends, please, do not be an old wineskin. To be teachable requires humbleness. The more you think you know the less open you are to learning something new. To be able to learn, you must first be teachable, and to be teachable, you must first be humble. The Bible declares that only the humble can be Saved.

These legalistic Christian Pharisees forcefully recruited other Jewish Christians to their position as well as, remarkably enough, many Gentile Christians. As a whole these Old Covenant loving legalistic Christians came to be known as Judaizers. This was the first big theological, doctrinal crises in Christian history.

The Judaizers, being human beings with opinions, didn't agree with each other on the particulars to be followed. There was a tremendous variety of beliefs theologically, doctrinally, and procedurally.

What they all had in common was the conviction that the purpose of Christianity was to facilitate better Judaism. Christianity, for them, was not a new religion,

or even a new branch of Judaism; it was true Judaism. True Judaism cannot be that, without the Judaism part.

Historically, for millennia, the Jews had never been able to stay on track with God, so for them, the whole reason God sent the Messiah was to fix that problem. For the less spiritual it was to defeat all the nations and make Israel the world superpower. For those with a more spiritual mindset, like the Jewish Believers, it was to enable them to better obey the Laws and customs of Moses.

So, from the perspective of the Judaizers these new Gentile Christians would need to become acceptable as Jews. The very first step in that direction would be circumcision. If the Gentile Christians would be circumcised, submit to Jewish Law, adhere to their Kosher dietary restrictions, their ceremonial purity rules, and properly observe their Sabbath practices... Then, and only then, could they be appropriately baptized into the church... as the second, or third-class Christians, that they would naturally be, as those with impure Gentile blood and previous pagan practices.

It may seem strange that a Gentile would want to jump through all the Jewish hoops only to be thought of as a

lesser Christian by those Christians who were more genetically Jewish, but it is still going on today right here in the Flathead Valley. We have a whole host of purely Gentile people striving to be Messianic Jews. Legalistic people love legalism.

People who love rules more than faith, who love working more than worshiping, who love personal performance and achievement more than God's Grace and mercy, are legalists. It is the belief and actions that try to earn God's favor.

It is always putting the cart before the horse. The Bible teaches that we Christians obey God, not to win His approval, but because we already have His approval in Christ. Our motivation for obedience starts with gratitude, moves through a desire to love God, and finally evolves to being. What do I mean by being? Ultimately, the mature Christian obeys God because that is simply who they have become in Christ – it is the way they roll because it is simply who they are. Isn't that who you want to be?

Legalism is a deep and treacherous ditch along one side of the Narrow Path. On the other side there is a similar ditch, technically called Antinomianism,



meaning against the law, also called Libertinism, where all the emphasis is on liberty. It is the anything goes mentality derived from the belief that God will forgive anything and everything in Christ. The thinking goes that we will never be perfect anyway, so why struggle, just do what you do, and rest in Grace. The Bible condemns that ditch every bit as forcefully as it condemns the legalism ditch.

As I just said, if you allow yourself to be motivated towards obedience by the Holy Spirit you will have an ever-growing desire to obey until it is just normal for you. Such maturity doesn't mean that you always get it right or that you don't stumble and fall short, but it does mean that the direction of your life is Christ-focused, rather than self-focused.

Can you see that both ditches are the result of self-focus – both to do with what you do? One is you doing in order to please God, for the express purpose of getting more of His favor for you – self-focused all the way.

The other is you doing in order to please you, because you assume that God cannot say no to you, let alone discipline you. Again, it's all about you.

If you are Christ-focused instead, you will stumble and when you do, honestly acknowledge that, apologize, repent, accept God's forgiveness in Christ, pick yourself up, hold your head high as a child of the Living God doing the best that you can. Keep moving forward, keep getting up and moving forward once again, ever towards the finish line of your life where Jesus is standing there to welcome you.

Once again, you do that not because you're trying to outperform others or trying to win "Brownie points" to get a better "mansion in the sky." But because that's who you've become in Christ Jesus. Because that's how we do things in His Family. Because that's what happens when we stay Christ-focused instead of self-focused.

Now, let me shock you... Think about that for a moment. I just told you that what I am about to say will potentially take you aback. Why the warning? I don't want you to instantly put up defenses... Listen to the whole thing, examine it, and then decide.

Here we go... Nearly all Christians... Are both Legalists and Libertines at the same time. Nearly all of us hold

some legalistic ideas about getting God more on our side and simultaneously, nearly all of us regularly break some law, rule, or standard assuming that God will just forgive us.

Therefore, since that is true, we should all strive daily and with intention, together with the indwelling Holy Spirit, to purge ourselves of all of our flirtations with the ditches – with self-focus. You can only play so long at the top of a ditch before you tumble to the bottom.

How do you stay on the straight and narrow path? On the one hand, you humbly, gratefully accept the fact that God Saved you into His family because of His character and performance, not because of yours. On the other hand, you recognize that as a member of God's family you are declared obedient, by Him. Christ's command, our marching orders and our mandate is to endeavor to match that supernatural reality with our physical life.

Another way to think about it is to ponder the concept of sin. Sin, at its core, is distrusting disobedience to God. Sin is such a big deal that the penalty for a single infraction of the smallest sin is eternal separation from

God. That's serious. Far more serious than a heart attack.

Legalistically, with that being the case, how could any human ever put a dent in the sin debt that they owe? It's ridiculous. Of course, only God can Save us from that. Of course, "Salvation belongs to the Lord." The only way a person could possibly think that they can help mitigate their debt, help earn their own Salvation, is to severely underestimate the severity of their sin and dramatically overestimate the value of their efforts.

On the Libertine side of things, how could we ever imagine that sin is no big deal when it cost the Word of God made flesh His life? God sacrificially Saved us from sin, not to sin. Paraphrasing the Bible, to accept God's forgiveness for sin, and then to willfully sin again is to spit in His face. It is to, according to Hebrews chapter 10, a trampling of Jesus Christ the Son of God underfoot. It is to treat the blood of the covenant as unholy. It is to insult the Spirit of grace.

So, love, worship, praise, and thank God for His Grace and then live your life as though you really mean that. That's all. Just do your best with the help of the Holy Spirit because you care and then you can, with a clear

conscience, rest in the Grace and Peace of God. That's all it takes. Don't get discouraged. Do your best and then trust the rest to Him.

So back to the opening verses of Acts chapter 15... Legalists of the Judaizer flavor launched from Jerusalem after learning from Mark that Paul was giving away the store.

Paul and Barnabas became aware of the Judaizer's vehement opposition to their missionary efforts when some of them arrived in Syrian Antioch to oppose them directly. What they discovered from the Judaizers, as implied in the Bible, was that many of their compatriots had already begun a massive effort to retrace the Apostle's steps and undo all of their ministry work.

The Judaizers had already infiltrated all of the churches that Paul and Barnabas had established and strengthened. As the Apostles were grappling with the scope of this opposition they began receiving reports, again implied by the Bible, that many of the churches had innocently embraced the Judaizers as mature Christian teachers and so, they had adopted their version of Christianity.

For Paul, what the Judaizers pushed wasn't a deeper Christianity, nor was it merely a different way of thinking about it, nor was it a harmless difference of opinion; it was a blasphemous heresy against Christ with the power to derail the church.

In verse 2 we see that the conclusion of the matter in Antioch was to have Paul and Barnabas, along with others from their group, go to Jerusalem for a confab to answer the question – just how Jewish did a person need to be in order to be a Christian? That multi-day, widely attended, meeting with all the Apostles and the other leaders of the universal church at the time is called the First Ecumenical Council.

Traditionally, before Paul departed for the Council meeting in Jerusalem, he quickly penned a letter to the churches that he and Barnabas had established. That Letter is our Bible Book Galatians. It was addressed as a circular letter to all the churches in the Roman Province of Galatia, and those along the way to Galatia, as well as those beyond.

What that means is that Paul made an original document that was sent with a small group of Disciples who would read it to those interested in each location.

They would give the various churches the opportunity to make a copy for themselves and then they would move on.

The final few verses of that letter summarize the contents. To paraphrase, Paul wrote in Galatians 6:12-17, “Some people are trying to force you to be circumcised in order for them to be approved by others. The Truth is, even those who are circumcised, don’t obey the law. They want you to be circumcised so they can brag about what has been done to your body as a result of their insistence... But circumcision and uncircumcision don’t mean anything. What does is the creation of a new nature... a spiritual circumcision. Let no one be deceived about me, my body bears the marks that show that I belong to Jesus, and it isn’t circumcision.”

“My body bears the marks that show that I belong to Jesus.” Marks is στίγματα (stēg-mä-tä), perhaps you’ve heard the term before – particularly if you have a Catholic background, or like horror movies. It is the plural of στίγμα (stēg-mä) giving us that same word in English. The marks Paul had in his physical body proving that He was Christ’s Apostle were the scars from his stoning in Lystra. An event no doubt well

known by all the Believers in Galatia. His point was that there was little persecution from Jews or Gentiles when the Gospel was presented as a watered-down encouragement to be a better Jew.

Preach Christ Crucified as the Word of God Who sacrificially paid for all sin as the One and Only Way to the Heavenly Father, and a whole lot of people will get very angry. Preaching the True Gospel of Christ is a stigma to the world and may very well result in physical stigmata.

P-46 Galatians 1:1&2, 1Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through human agency, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead), 2and all the brothers who are with me, To the churches of Galatia.

This is so much fun, isn't it? I love starting a new Book of the Bible. I hope you all remember when we began the Book of Acts, I said that we would use it as a framework to study the Epistles as they were written in the sequence of events. Paul's Letter to the Galatians is the first such Epistle... Probably.



I say probably because the consensus among scholars used to be that this was the very first Book of the New Testament Bible ever written. The standard belief was, as I mentioned, that Paul wrote from Syrian Antioch in 48 A.D., just before the Jerusalem Council, to the churches that he and Barnabas had just established.

Now, there are some scholars who have adopted a new theory based on what they perceive as the internal evidence of Paul's Letters. They accept the questionable idea that I & II Thessalonians are less Theologically developed than Galatians and therefore they must have been written earlier. Those two Letters can't have been written before Paul established the churches there, which he did during his Second Missionary Journey. That pushes the writing of Galatians to the early 50's A.D.

I have said it many times, there is no good reason to abandon tradition unless there's a very good reason and this doesn't come close to qualifying.

The whole premise would require that Paul was still trying to figure out basic Theology well into his Third Missionary Journey. If Paul was writing as just a devout

dude, maybe. If Paul was writing Bible Books under the Inspiration of the Holy Spirit, no way.

In chapter 1, verses 11&12, Paul wrote, “11I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. 12I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.”

To adopt the view that Galatians was written after I&II Thessalonians because Paul’s Christian Theology was evolving is to repudiate Paul’s own claim. Paul spent well over a decade, mostly alone, with his revelation from Christ and his extensive Bible education. It’s safe to say that any perceived difference in the depth of Paul’s Theology has to do with the difference in purpose of his Letters.

I’m excited to go through Galatians with you, I doubt many of you remember the last time we did...

According to my records it was in the spring/summer of 2007. Only 17 ½ years ago.

To quickly demonstrate the deep connection to where we’re at in the Book of Acts let me whet your appetite with Galatians 1:6–8, where Paul wrote, “6I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who

called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel, 7which is not just another account; but there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. 8But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!”

Likewise, my friends, do not allow anyone to distort the Christ-centered Gospel, nor the Christ-focused life of the Christian. It's not just another account, it's a different Gospel.