

NT LEADER'S GUIDE

GALATIANS & EPHESIANS

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GOSPEL TRAINING CENTER
AT LAKEWOOD



Lakewood
BAPTIST CHURCH

NT Leader's Guide: Galatians & Ephesians

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GALATIANS

Authorship & Audience

The Apostle Paul (1:1) wrote this letter to the church in Galatia, a Roman province in the area that is today Turkey. Paul had evangelized the area of southern Galatia during his first missionary journey in the year AD 47 (Acts 13:4-14:28). Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, mentioned in Acts, are all cities in Galatia.

The dating of the first missionary journey is our first clue as to when this letter might have been written. The other key date is the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) in AD 49. Given that the issues

discussed at the Jerusalem council are the very same issues Paul advocates in this letter, it seems odd that he does not mention the Jerusalem Council if it had already occurred. This leads many commentators



to believe that Galatians was written in AD 48, between the first missionary journey and the Jerusalem council. Since this is an argument from silence, it is not decisive, but 48 is a probable date. At the latest, Galatians was written in the early 50s, making it one of the earliest, if not the earliest NT books.

Purpose

Paul writes to the church in Galatia to oppose false teachers. In 1:6-7, he exclaims, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him

who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - not there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.” Paul fears that the Galatians are abandoning the gospel and thereby abandoning Jesus.

There is some debate over what exactly Paul was opposing in this letter. That is, there is a question over what the false teachers taught. When we read Galatians, or any other New Testament letter, we only

Yet there is another righteousness, far above the others, which Paul calls “the righteousness of faith” - Christian righteousness. God imputes it to us apart from our works - in other words, it is *passive* righteousness, as the others are *active*. For we *do* nothing for it, and we *give* nothing for it. We only receive it.

- Martin Luther

hear one side of the conversation. Like when you hear someone next to you on the phone, you can usually piece together what the person on the other end of the call is saying, but sometimes it is difficult to know for sure. Reconstructing the teachings of the false teachers has presented some challenges to commentators on this letter.

The debate centers on the phrase “works of the law” (2:16, 3:2, 3:5, 3:10). Some would argue that “works of the law” refers to cultural boundary markers such as the ceremonial laws, dietary laws, purity laws, Sabbath, and circumcision. These boundary markers divide Jew and Gentile, and so under this interpretation the problem Paul addresses in Galatians is that his opponents demand that the Gentile Christians embrace these boundary markers and become culturally Jewish. Paul’s opponents want the Galatian Christians to become culturally Jewish in order to be faithful Christians.

“Works of the law,” however, is best understood as referring to all that is commanded in the law. Thus, “works of the law” is not less than the cultural boundary markers, but when Paul uses this term, he also includes all that the law requires. “Works of the law” encompasses both the ceremonial and the moral aspects of the Old Testament Law.

Such an all-encompassing understanding of “works of the law” in Paul’s writing reveals that the inclusion of the Gentiles into the one people of God and the unity of the church were major issues for

Paul. The Gentile Christians did not need to become culturally Jewish to be saved by the work of Christ. However, this cultural division was only part of the trouble Paul addresses in Galatians.

In fact the cultural division was only one manifestation of a more fundamental problem: legalism. Legalism teaches that Jesus is not enough. Legalism distorts the gospel of Jesus Christ, saying that something must be added to the work of Christ in order for people to be reconciled to God. Paul's opponents were adding "works of the law" to the gospel. They were insisting that people could only be saved by following both the cultural aspects and moral demands of the Old Testament law. These opponents taught that the Gentiles needed to be circumcised and obey all the precepts of the law in order to be justified before God. Salvation came, they argued, through Christ and the works of the law.

Paul's purpose in Galatians is to oppose this legalism. He argues forcefully that right standing with God comes through faith in Jesus Christ (2:16). Justification is a free gift of God. Justification is not based upon what any person does but upon what Christ has done. Believers are justified before God when they are united with Christ by faith and God reckons Christ's righteousness as their own.

Application

The overarching message of Galatians is that salvation is a free gift of God through Jesus Christ. The primary application is to understand and to live in light of the reality that our justification before God cannot be earned by human effort but is a free gift. Salvation is from the Lord.

Thus, we must be wary of adding anything to the gospel. Any addition to the message of Jesus negates the goodness of the good news. Galatians demonstrates how subtle our legalism - our adding works to the gospel - can be. Jesus was important to Paul's opponents, but he was not enough for them. They began with Jesus and added the law to him. We do not begin following Christ by God's grace only to have to continue by our own work. Rather, the entirety of the Christian life is by grace alone. In our own lives and in discipling others, we need to be vigilant that we do not make the implications of the gospel the gospel itself. Love for our neighbors is

the overflow of a heart changed by the love of God, but when we love our neighbors as ourselves we do not thereby make ourselves more lovable to God. God loves us because of the work of Christ, not our own love for others.

Additionally, Paul shows us the importance of unity and community within the church. Here in Galatians, Paul is

The gospel shows us that our spiritual problem lies not only in failing to obey God, but also in relying on our obedience to make us fully acceptable to God, ourselves, and others.

- Tim Keller

concerned with cultural and ethnic divisions caused by a misunderstanding of the gospel. Gentile Christians are not second-class citizens in the people of God, but they are fully part of the people of God because of the work of Christ (3:27-29). We need to understand that in Christ all social, ethnic, and racial divisions have been broken down. The new creation reality of Revelation 7:9 should begin to be true in the church today. Practically speaking, this means that we should not suppose that the body of Christ will be monolithic. Furthermore, it would be counter to the gospel if we asked or expected those who come to faith in Christ to embrace our particular cultural preferences and practices.

Discussion Questions

Feel free to use the discussion questions below as much or as little as you would like in your small group. The goal should be both to understand the passage and to apply it to our lives. Some of us too quickly jump to application without understanding the passage in its context, but others of us would rather discuss the meaning without ever getting to how it applies to our lives. We should strive to find a good balance between understanding and application.

Week 1

1. 1:6-9 | How would you describe Paul's tone in chapter 1, especially in verses 6-9? Why does he speak this way? Are we as concerned about the gospel as he is?

2. 1:10 | Where are you tempted to seek the approval of others rather than from God? How is the gospel of Jesus the antidote to living in need of others' approval?
3. 2:10 | What did the church leaders in Jerusalem ask Paul to remember to do? If justification, as Paul argues in this letter, is by faith and not by works, why should he be concerned about this?
4. 2:15-16 | What does it mean to be justified? How are we justified before God? How does Paul's message of justification differ from what other religions and the world teach about how to be right with God?
5. 2:20 | What does it mean to be crucified with Christ? How does that change the way you live daily?
6. 3:13-14 | What is the curse that Christ took on for his people? What was the blessing promised to Abraham that he won for his people? See Genesis 12:1-3. How is the Holy Spirit connected to this blessing promised to Abraham?

Week 2

1. 4:4-6 | Why do you think Paul speaks of being sons of God rather than sons and daughters of God? What are the benefits of sonship he lists for all believers? How do we become sons of God?
2. 5:1 | What is this freedom Paul describes here? How does 5:13-14 help us better understand that freedom? How should we use our freedom?
3. 5:16-25 | How are verses 17-25 an explanation of what it means to walk by the Spirit? How do the fruits of the Spirit (vv. 22-23) grow in our lives?
4. 6:1-2 | Why is important to be in community with other believers? How are you helping to "bear one another's burdens" in the body of Christ?
5. 6:9-10 | Who can you encourage to not grow weary in doing good? How will you encourage them this week? To whom can you do good this week?

EPHESIANS

Authorship & Audience

The Apostle Paul (1:1) wrote the letter to the Ephesians between AD 60-62 while he was imprisoned in Rome (3:1; 6:20; Acts 28). The letter is addressed to the church in Ephesus, a large city in modern-day Turkey. In Paul's day, around 250,000 people lived in the city and the surrounding area.

We read in Acts 18:19-21 of Paul's arrival in Ephesus on his second missionary journey. Acts 19:1-40 records Paul's return to Ephesus for a significant period of time on this third missionary journey, and then on his way to Jerusalem at the end of this missionary journey he will meet with the Ephesian elders in the nearby port city of Miletus (Acts 20:17-38). In addition to Paul's interactions with the Ephesians in Acts, he also wrote to Timothy while Timothy was pastoring the church in Ephesus to instruct him on leading the church (1 Timothy 1:3). The Apostle John also wrote an epistle to the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2:1-7.

Theme & Application

In this letter, Paul demonstrates that Jesus Christ has reconciled all creation to himself and to God the Father. Paul takes a cosmic view of this reconciliation, writing about God's purpose, "which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (1:9-10). Note that "all things" are united in Christ, and this includes "things in heaven and things on earth." All of creation is reconciled to God through Christ.

This epistle contains three kinds of writing - admonitory, doctrinal, and exhortatory. To write to friends about the meaning of salvation is a sign of true friendship. Paul's love which burned with concern for the church of Christ, is here commended to us. It is a love that ought to shake off our laziness, our lukewarm neglect of our brethren and their churches, indeed, our pretense of charity.
- Martin Bucer (1491-1551)

For Paul, the truth of Christ's reconciling work has three main points of application. First, Paul begins the letter with praise (1:3-14). God's work in Christ means that he is worthy of worship. The first word after the letter's salutation is a call to praise God: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:3). Then, Paul describes the realities of God's reconciling us in Christ as being "to the praise of his glorious grace" (1:6). In the second chapter, Paul speaks of God's saving through Christ alone as being a way to demonstrate "the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (2:7). Likewise the sending of the Spirit is "to the praise of his glory" (1:14). Christ's reconciling work is for the glory of God.

Second, the reconciliation of all things to God through Christ should lead to unity in the church. People from every nation and ethnicity have been reconciled to God through Christ, and so these people who have been reconciled to God should be reconciled to each other and unified with one another. Paul emphasizes that there is no longer a distinction between Jew and Gentile but all are one in Christ (3:28). Jew and Gentile together now make up the people of God. From 2:11 to 4:16, Paul stresses the unity of God's people in Christ. For the first century audience, the main division to be broken down was between Jew and Gentile, but it is not hard to make the connection to twenty-first century application and the need for God's people to display this same unity in Christ in our increasingly fractured society.

Third, the reconciliation of all things to God through Christ means that those who have been reconciled should live as new creations. Paul urges the hearers of this letter, "Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (4:1). The last three chapters of this letter focus on living in the reality of being reconciled to God in Christ. There are distinct ethical realities to living as one who has been saved through the finished work of Christ. Paul calls on believers to put off the old self and to put on the new self (4:22-24). These ethical demands are far-reaching, including our everyday interactions with others (4:25-32), our sexuality (5:3), our humor (5:4), our marriages (5:22-32), obeying our parents (6:1-3), our parenting (6:4), and how we work at our jobs (6:5-9). Those who have been reconciled to God must display the fruits of that reconciliation in their daily lives.

Discussion Questions

Please use these questions as starting points for discussion in your group. Feel free to use as many or as few as you find helpful.

Week 1

1. 1:3-14 | What do you think Paul's goal was in writing these verses? Does reflecting on the truths of who God is and what he has done lead you to praise him?
2. 1:15-23 | What are the main requests Paul makes in this prayer? For whom could you pray these verses?
3. 2:1-10 | According to these verses, how is one made right with God? What do people contribute to their own salvation? Who should be praised for sinners being reconciled to God?
4. 2:19-22 | What are the images Paul uses to describe the people of God in these verses? Upon what OT images is he building? How do these images employed by Paul shape our understanding of who we are as the body of Christ?
5. 3:14-20 | What does Paul pray for the Ephesians here? For whom could you pray this prayer?

Week 2

1. 4:1-6 | What is the basis for the unity of the church? What practical instructions does Paul give toward developing and maintaining that unity?
2. 4:17-5:21 | Why does Paul not just speak of putting off old ways of life but also adds putting on new ways? What part of this list is the greatest challenge for you?
3. 5:15-16 | What does it mean for you to make "the best use of the time," or as some translations have it, "redeem the time"? What tangible steps can you take to make the best use of time?
4. 5:22-33 | How does the life and work of Christ model how wives and husbands should live? How is marriage supposed to point to the gospel?

5. 6:10-20 | What connection do you see between these verses and 1:19-20? Why do you think Paul would emphasize these truths? What application do they have for your life?