



good shepherd
presbyterian church

Grace and a Wooden Nickel

Galatians 1

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I remember being a little boy and my grandfather telling me, “Don’t take any wooden nickels!” I think he might have even given me one. I had to look up the origin of “wooden nickels.” They were used in a few places during the Great Depression as a stand-in for money, redeemable for specific things at participating stores. The Chicago World’s Fair in 1933 issued them as souvenirs. But the phrase “Don’t take any wooden nickels” pre-dates both those things and has a specific meaning. It means something like “Don’t be fooled” or “Don’t fall for any counterfeits.”

For the next six weeks we are going to go through the New Testament book of Galatians. And in a very significant way, “Don’t be fooled” and “Don’t fall for any counterfeits” is the theme of Galatians, or at least one side of the coin (ha!). The Apostle Paul is teaching and living the real thing and he is running into Christians who have fallen for a counterfeit. It may be called the same thing and look very similar, but it’s like a wooden nickel. So in Galatians Paul is focused on what is real, what is from God, and calling out the counterfeit wherever he sees it. In the process he lives out many of the teachings he writes about at length in other letters. In Romans he talks about God not playing favorites. In Ephesians he writes about unity. But here is where all that has to be lived out and figured out. In the first chapter of Galatians he puts the counterfeits on notice and declares what is really real: the grace of God.

When You’ve Seen the Real Thing...

Paul begins with a summary of the great theme he will take up for the whole letter: “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord

Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us...” (vv.3-4) That’s the real thing and at the core not only of what Paul has to say, but who Paul is, because Christ rescued him.

Paul pretty quickly names the problem of a counterfeit gospel, but he won’t get to the details of it until chapter two and following. He writes in verse 6, “I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel....” It’s like he has said, “Don’t take any wooden nickels; hey, let me show you what a real nickel looks like!”

And so for the rest of chapter one he focuses on the “real thing” - and begins by sharing his own experience of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. And he has quite a story to tell!

He makes a point to say that Jesus is the ultimate authority who determines what the real thing, the real gospel is. He warns against *anyone* deviating from or distorting the gospel of Christ: another person, an angel from Heaven, or even Paul himself. Any message, any teaching, any claim to be the Good News, needs to be measured against the very person and teaching of Jesus Christ.

And that’s where Paul begins his story, by describing how he received that Good News from Jesus Christ himself, through “a revelation of Jesus Christ.” (v.12) He goes on to say, “You have heard of my former manner of life.” Yes indeed; Paul was the enemy! He “Used to persecute the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it...” (v.13). The detailed version of his story, as Saul, begins in Acts 7:58 where he is noted as standing over the robes of those who killed Stephen, one of the early Christians. Acts 8 continues, describing his zeal for persecuting the early Christians: “Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.” (Acts 8:3) He was certainly known and feared in those early days.

But God had a plan! Echoing themes he’d write more about in Ephesians 1, Paul says that God “had set me apart even from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace.” (v.15) God was “pleased to reveal His

Son” (vv.15-16). Acts 9 describes the Saul’s encounter with Jesus while on the road leading to Damascus. A great light appeared and a voice said, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (9:4) Saul asked, “Who are you, Lord?” And the voice answered, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.” (v.5) Saul arose, blinded, and was led to someone God directed to meet him. God directed that man to lay hands on his eyes to restore his sight and to give him a mission and purpose.

And God’s purpose? He told Ananias, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake” (9:15-16). In Galatians Paul is more succinct; it is so he “might preach [Christ] among the Gentiles.” (v.16)

Grace is the Truth of the Gospel

One of the phrases I want to keep coming back to during this series on Galatians is that *Grace IS the Truth of the Gospel*. I like to point out our twin banners, Truth and Grace. And I’ve talked about we hold those things together in tension. Truth can feel like the rules, the hard thing, the tough guy. Grace can feel like another chance, getting off easy, or something to take advantage of. The more we can hold the two together the closer we are to the Good News of Jesus, the REAL THING. In fact, Paul holds Grace and Truth so closely together that they are the same thing. That’s what I want you to get a glimpse of during the series, that God’s grace truly is the truth of Jesus and of scripture.

As soon as we get into chapter two this will get tested. Surely some are a little closer to God than others? Maybe the Jews have a leg up over Gentiles? Or the disciples; they were the “inner circle” after all... they probably have a little more credit with God, right? Do we do that? Do we think that being regular or involved at church wins us some points with God? Or the people that do so many good things for other people are earning God’s favor? Or that the deacons or elders are spiritual black belts? Or that the pastor has an inside track to God? I think, yes, if we are truthful it is easy to buy in to that kind of thinking.

Or perhaps easier to buy into the opposite:

...that people who don't have their act together are less worthy. Wooden nickels!

...that those who don't attend church or read their Bible or pray are less deserving of God's attention. Wooden nickels!

...that one's education or wealth or class or race has any bearing on one's worth in God's eyes. Wooden nickels!

All that and more is going on in Galatians and it is relevant to our lives today.

And who better to get right to the heart of what is real and what is counterfeit than the enemy of Christ who was saved to take the message of Christ to the Gentile world? And did I leave out that he was also a wealthy, educated Jewish Roman citizen who was trained as a Pharisee, an expert in the scripture and keeping God's Law? Once God broke through and showed him that all his worth was wooden nickels, he was never the same. He knew grace; he knew he had done nothing and had nothing with which to impress God or deserve God's love. If anything, he deserved God's punishment. But... grace. That's what Paul wants to teach us and show us in Galatians: Grace is the Truth of the Gospel!

I want to challenge you over the next six weeks to grab hold of that statement and wrestle with it until you understand it more deeply. Try to learn what it means and what the implications are for your life and way of engaging the world. Grace is the heart of God. Amen!