June 22, 2025
Galatians 1:1-10
We had before us a powerful, strikinging Gospel lesson today- the demoniac with a legion of demons, and we saw Jesus' power- at the very sight of Jesus the demons were filled with terror and dread and could only beg for his mercy. That may be a disturbing thought to some of you- that demons not only exist, but are active and even sometimes possess people. But that's not their most potent threat. Not even close. The churches Paul is writing to in the province of Galatia, modern day southwestern Turkey, were proof of this. They were under the influence of demons, and they were in grave, grave spiritual danger. Not from possession or terror- no, that would be far too obvious. These churches were under attack by something far more subtle, yet far more destructive, venomous, and deadly: Lies, or what we would officially call, *False Doctrine.* False teaching, had infiltrated these churches. Not from the Greek pagans, their priests or witch doctors. Not from the Roman government which often oppressed Christians. *This false doctrine, which threatened to destroy God's churches, came from people who claimed to be Christians.* It didn't deny the fact that God existed! It didn't deny that Jesus was the true God! In fact, these false teachers had no problem saying that Jesus died for their sins- they wouldn't have denied that! No, this false doctrine was much more subtle, and therefore much more dangerous. The teachers certainly taught that Jesus saved people through faith, but if the Gentile Christians wanted to truly be saved, and truly be a part of the people of God, they had to adopt the customs of the Jews, the original people of God and be circumcised and eat like them. That's it! That's the false teaching! And Paul thinks it's a big enough deal to write a whole book about it! Really? Is it really that big of a deal? Yes. So, let's walk through the opening part of Paul's letter to these Christians and hear what God has to teach us.

Paul introduces himself as the "Apostle," not sent by men or through men. That's a big deal. I as your pastor was sent by God to you- that's absolutely true- but it was through men, through the Church- namely the WELS assignment committee. God sent me to you, but he didn't come down and say, "Sam- go to St. John's Lutheran Church in Whitewater, WI." That means that while I can say that I'm God's servant sent to give you his Word, I'm not infallible. I was sent through imperfect people, and I myself am imperfect. But what Paul claims about himself is remarkable- that he wasn't sent by the other apostles. Jesus himself came to him and called him to do this work- to plant churches and teach his Word with binding authority, and everything he's about to say in this letter is not *his* opinion, it isn't his take on Jesus teaching- it *is* Jesus' teaching. The Gospel that Paul is teaching here is not *his* Gospel, it's *Jesus'* Gospel. That's what he's claiming here. And what is this "Gospel" according to Paul, but really Jesus? Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins. That's important- Jesus is not primarily a teacher or a leader- he's different from any other religious teacher. Every religious teacher is just that- a teacher, but Jesus was more than a teacher- he is a deliverer. He is a sacrifice. He gave himself over to a death that we deserved for the sins we've committed against a Holy God, and he did so to deliver us, to save us, to rescue us from death, Hell, despair, and punishment forever. This is why we can rest, why we can know all

things are going to be okay. And what's the result of this Gospel? The Glory of God. God gets all the glory and praise as we reign with him in his glory forever. That's the message that was being perverted.

Now here's the first shocking thing about this letter- not what Paul says, but what Paul doesn't say. Some of you are studying 1 Corinthians with us, and you may remember how Paul began that letter- *I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge.* Now, *that* congregation that Paul said that to, had cliques, shocking sexual scandal, rich members abusing the poor, and pride and all kinds of false doctrine- and Paul still could say, "I thank God for you." He doesn't say that about the Galatian Christians. No thanksgiving. No joy. No praise. Instead, "I'm shocked. I'm astonished. I'm bewildered. I'm disgusted." Why? Because the Galatian Christians had abandoned Jesus so quickly for a different Gospel. Now wait! That's a bit strong! They were still praying to Jesus! They were still worshiping Jesus! They weren't worshiping any other gods! How can Paul say that they have so quickly abandoned Jesus? Because when you abandon the Gospel, you abandon Jesus. It's that simple. "But Paul, we haven't abandoned the Gospel! We still believe Jesus died on the cross for our sins! We just think that Jewish customs should also be added so that Christians can be extra sure that they are saved. Yes, we are saved by God's grace, but we also need to do those practices- they're important! We still believe the Gospel!" No you don't. When you add to the Gospel, you lose the Gospel. When you add conditions to Jesus' grace, you lose the Gospel. When you add anything as necessary for salvation other than faith in Jesus' blood on the cross, you've lost the Gospel, and abandoned Jesus." Therefore, Paul says something that may shock you, but really shouldn't. If anyone preaches a different Gospel, let him be *damned.* That's the idea Paul is getting at. Let anyone who teaches something different than what Jesus taught be damned- even an angel, even me. And if you're thinking, "Wow, Paul, that's extreme! He must be running a bit hot." No. Paul doubles down and says, "Let anyone who preaches a different Gospel be damned."

Thought question: Does Paul love these people? Most of them likely came to faith through him- he was their first pastor/missionary. Did he love them? Yes. But he's so angry! He's so condemning! Yes. Because he loves these Christians so much, he will fight for the Gospel- even if they don't like him for a bit. He loves them enough not to care how they feel about him for a bit, he will gladly challenge, confront, even anger them- because he loves them, and their eternal destiny is at risk. Why? Not because of demonic possession, not because of some great, shocking sins, but because they've abandoned the Gospel. And he will fight to get them back in this letter.

Some takeaways: 1. When you lose the Gospel, you lose Jesus. That seems extreme! You're saying that if someone prays to Jesus, loves Jesus, but has a different idea of how to be saved, doesn't really think Jesus died on the cross for their sins, but still worships him and goes to church, but doesn't believe the Gospel, isn't really saved? Yes. That's exactly what I'm saying. I

know that's hard teaching- but let's talk about it. A theologian named Franz Pieper once noticed, *"There are only two religions in the world. The religion of works, and the religion of grace."* Every religion can be summed up this way- you must perform certain deeds, you must say certain words, you must stay away from certain attitudes, temptations, sins, and thoughts. You must give certain sacrifices, and if you do whatever it is you're told, then you will be blessed. You will reach Heaven, or Nirvana, or Moksha, or you will be blessed here and now. That's how all religions ultimately work- including much of Christianity- be a good person, be like Jesus, try your best and God will do the rest! That's not the Gospel. And even when it sounds very reasonable, "just be a good person," according to whose standard? Your standard? God's standard? Who can truly say they've been a good person up to their own standards, let alone God's? Let's be honest! And when the false teachers said, "Sure, Jesus saves you by faith, but circumcision is really important, you need to act and smell like us Jews if you really want to be saved," they were twisting, reversing, perverting the Gospel. The Gospel is not that if we do good things, God will love us and bless us. The Gospel is that while we were absolutely sinful, absolutely lost, evil and depraved, God loved us, sent his son to die in our place so that through faith in him, and faith in him alone, we are absolutely perfect, beautiful, and forgiven. The Gospel is why I can say with full confidence, all your sins are forgiven when you repent. The Gospel is why I can say with full confidence, Beckett has been washed clean and pure and his name is written in GOd's book of life. The GOspel is why if I have the privilege to hold your hand at your deathbed, I will be able to say, you don't need to be afraid to see Jesus, because he has paid your price and you are free. The Gospel is why if I have the privilege of doing your funeral, I can say with joy, "we don't need to wonder where she is, because her salvation didn't depend on her goodness, but on what Jesus has done." That's the Gospel, and when you lose that, you lose everything. When the church loses the Gospel, it ceases being the church- one pastor said it this way- A hospital's existence isn't threatened by the presence of sick people. In fact, you'd expect a lot of sick people in a hospital! But when a hospital loses its medicine, then it is no longer a hospital. In the same way, the presence of sinful people isn't a threat to the existence of a church. We should expect sinners, broken people who don't have their lives together. But when we lose the Gospel, that's when we are no longer a church, but a club. That's true as a Church, that's also true of individual Christians. When you lose the Gospel, you lose the peace Jesus wants you to have, and yes, you lose Jesus. Therefore…

2. Fight for the Gospel within your own heart. Every addition to the Gospel, every "Jesus saved you… but…" ultimately robs God of his glory. Whenever we say, "Sure, we are saved by faith alone, but also…" we are robbing God of his glory. And all of us, within the deepest corners of our hearts, are attempting to do that. When a Christian says, "Sure, I'm saved by grace," but hates people of a different race, or different political belief, or different social class, as if they are inferior, less deserving of grace and mercy than he is, that means he has forgotten the Gospel- that he wasn't deserving of Jesus' grace either, and is in danger. When a Christian says, "I'm saved by grace," but looks down on other Christians who struggle with different sins, or aren't as "spiritual," or (in many a Pastors' case) don't have all the right doctrine, or they think they need

to somehow add to Jesus' perfect work on the cross, as if their good works could ever do that, they are forgetting the Gospel and robbing God of his glory- as if it's because of their gifts, their theological understanding, their supposed maturity that Jesus saved them. See how that works? Whatever you add to the free grace of God, either on an official doctrinal level, or on a personal level in your heart, it's dangerous. It robs you of your peace. Friends, the Gospel is so precious. It's so unique. It's so beautiful. It's so liberating. It's the very heart and foundation of everything we are and do. Love it. Embrace it. Fight for it. Amen.