

“God’s Trophy”

Galatians 1:11-24

To begin with this morning, I’m going to read to you from Acts chapter 26. It’s Paul’s account of his own conversion before King Agrippa. I’m going to pick and choose some spots because it will fit into the Galatians passage.

⁵ *They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee.*

⁹ *“I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. ¹¹ And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.*

¹² *“In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. ¹³ At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. ¹⁴ And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’ ¹⁵ And I said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. ¹⁶ But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, ¹⁷ delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you ¹⁸ to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’” (ESV)*

This is the third sermon into the Book of Galatians. The Book of Galatians was written by the apostle Paul, and it was written to people who were Pharisees or were becoming Pharisees. He says that the Galatians were deserting the gospel. What’s a Pharisee? The nice thing about being a Pharisee is that there are a million different ways to illustrate it. It’s almost everywhere you look. But the bottom line is a Pharisee is someone who believes that they will receive acceptance and pleasure from God through something other than Jesus alone. That’s the whole point of Paul’s letter: Jesus plus anything equals nothing. If you try and add something to the gospel, you lose, Paul is going to say. So a Pharisee is constantly struggling with doing good things, almost always good things, in order to gain the approval of God or the approval of men. If you’re a Pharisee you’re more concerned about the rules or people than you are about the gospel. You’re a Pharisee, by the way, if you dislike Pharisees. That’s my struggle. The first Sunday I started preaching, someone walked out and said, “I don’t know what I feel about going to a church where the pastor hates me.” He got it! So did I! When I was in seminary I had a professor named Roger Nicole. He was in his 80s then, and struggled with narcolepsy, which made class interesting. He was from France and had a great French accent. One time I was complaining about Pharisees or something—I forget what the complaint was—but I do remember him looking over and saying, “My brother, you have just out-Phariseed the Pharisee.” I don’t even remember what I was complaining about but I never forgot that.

Basically there are two parties in Galatia that are causing a problem. One is the Judaizers. The Judaizers are the ones coming in probably from Jerusalem and telling the Galatians, “You know, you need to add something to the gospel. I know Paul said, ‘Trust Jesus,’ and trusting in Jesus is good. But really what you need to do is trust Jesus and you need to become circumcised.” So they were watering down the gospel by adding to it. The Galatians, on the other hand, were simply deserting the gospel by embracing that teaching. So that’s the struggle. Paul enters into this discussion with the Galatians, and the first thing he says, “I’m astonished at you.” His telling the Galatians that he was astonished is like that parental feeling when you tell your child not to touch the stove and he touches the stove and burns himself and you don’t know whether to be angry or compassionate. That’s what Paul is feeling when he says, “I’m astonished that you are so quickly leaving the gospel.” Yet he says there is only one gospel. That’s it. One. Uno. It. Ein. “Anyone who preaches a gospel other than what I have preached to you,” he says to them, “let them be accursed. If an angel does it or another preacher, or even if I come to you and say something different than what you’ve heard, let him be accursed.” In other words, “You are bound for hell if you preach anything or believe anything other than what I have delivered to you.” That’s pretty clear, is it not? Some people struggle with that and say, “How can he say there is only one gospel? Doesn’t everything sort of lead to the same place?” It really doesn’t. At the end of the day, no matter who you are, you believe that there is only one gospel.

Lesslie Newbigin was a missionary in India for about fifty years. After fifty years he came back from the mission field and started writing. One of the most famous objections to the gospel that he often got was that it was too exclusive. People would use the

illustration of the three blind men meeting an elephant. Three blind men approach an elephant and their task is to touch the elephant and to tell the world what an elephant is like. The first guy goes up and grabs the tail and said, "Elephants are weak and measly. They're thin with a little tuft of fur. They must be cute but really, it's all they are." The next guy says, "No, an elephant is as solid as a rock." He put his hand on the midsection and said adamantly, "You can't get around them they're just so big." The third guy grabs the trunk and says, "Elephants are weak and mushy." The person would say, "See, they all had part of the truth because they were all touching the same elephant." The problem with that, Newbigin would respond to them and I also tell you, is that the only way you can say that all of these men only have part of the truth is if you were somehow able to be behind them and see the whole truth yourself. By saying that no one has the whole truth, no one has the one gospel; you have just articulated the one gospel. It's not the right one, but it is a statement that is just as exclusive as Paul saying, "There is only one gospel." How can he say that? Where does he get off saying something like, I have the one gospel and no one else does? That's what we're going to look at today. Paul tells us why he has the only true gospel, and then he's going to give us three arguments to back up his claim. He starts with a surprising claim. Let me read it to you.

¹¹ *For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. ¹² For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (ESV)*

So why is Paul's gospel in his opinion the one gospel, the only true gospel? It's because he didn't receive it from man to begin with. "Someone else didn't tell me the gospel," Paul is saying. "And I didn't receive it from tradition. I received it directly from God by revelation of Jesus Christ. It's the one true gospel because God Himself gave it to me in the person and work of His Son, Jesus." Remember the road to Damascus? That's why I opened with reading that. Paul also wants to make it clear that this gospel did come from God. The rest of the arguments he makes are how we know that it came from God, on one hand; on the other hand, he shows us how it could not have not come from man. He couldn't have learned it from some other person; he didn't go to Jerusalem and where taught him and then back, because one of the claims apparently that people made against Paul is that, "He went to Jerusalem and learned the gospel from Peter, James, and John, and then when he went out and began preaching, Paul started deviating from what Jerusalem taught." Paul's going to show us this morning, "There's no way I can deviate from what Jerusalem taught because I didn't get what I got from Jerusalem. I got it directly from the Source. I got it from Jesus Himself." So Paul is going to give three arguments for his gospel. The first is an argument from his past. The second argument is an argument from what happened when Jesus appeared to him. And the third argument is what happened after his conversion. Let's look at Paul's past.

¹³ *For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴ And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. (ESV)*

First off he says, "For you know of my former life in Judaism." They know of it either because Paul told them when he came through there and preached it as part of his story. ("Here is who I was and here now is who I am.") His detractors were saying it about him: "Do you know how bad Paul is? You're telling me Paul says you don't have to be circumcised, and you look at what he did. Paul was so zealous for the law he tried to kill Christians and you're telling me Paul doesn't think you should be circumcised. You don't think the law is important?" Paul says, "I was so zealous that I not only persecuted the church savagely but I tried to destroy it." I read it to you in the book of Acts. Paul says, "When Christians were brought before the council and there had to be a vote as to whether to kill them, I voted to kill them. I tried to destroy the church." He says, "I was the head of my class (if you will) at Tarsus High School. The THS Pharisees "I was the valedictorian there, so zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers." Here's what you need to get. What is it that made Paul odious and evil and bad? Was it his adultery? Was it his thievery? It was his goodness. It was Paul's zeal for the law. It was his zeal for good things that actually made him ultimately turn out bad. It always is that way. Almost all badness, if you look throughout history, is rooted in goodness. And when I say goodness I mean self-righteousness. Look at the Nazis: why did the Nazis and Hitler kill six million Jews? Was it simply because they thought Jews were bad? No, it's because they thought they were superior. Superiority always leads itself to zeal and it always leads itself to harm.

Which, just as a side note, also happens today. I've been in ministry for about fifteen years now, and in fifteen years I've never seen a church divided or split because of unrighteousness. I'm sure it's happened. I've personally have never seen it. I've never seen some lascivious behavior result in a church splitting and dividing. On the other hand, I have seen more churches than I can count on both of my hands and my feet that have been split, divided, crushed, ruined, and destroyed by well intentioned yet self-

righteous Christians. Self-righteousness always leads to a negative place. It never leads to something good. People are well intentioned. Do you think Paul was ill intentioned? Every time Paul cast his vote to kill a Christian, every time he dragged someone to prison, he probably patted himself on the back and he and the boys went out with their arms around each other and said, "Another one down. God must love us." Yet in retrospect we realize that all of these things he thought were good and all of the things that he was doing to destroy the church were actually bad. In fact they were evil. Now, why does Paul give that as the first argument for why his gospel had to come from God? I think the answer is just that someone like that doesn't change very easily. Paul knew the Bible; he was at the top of his class. He knew the Bible better than anyone else. He was obviously a good rhetorician. He was good at argumentation. Did you ever try to have an argument with someone who knows the Bible pretty well and they're also good at arguing? Ask my wife, it's pretty hard. So it wasn't that Paul didn't know the Bible. It wasn't that he didn't know all of the traditions of the fathers. The point is that God, in spite of Paul's goodness, in spite of his self-righteousness, in spite of his zeal for the wrong thing, God changed him. People like that don't change on their own. Guess what, people like you and me—we don't change on our own either. If you're a Christian, the reason you're here today is because God changed you, not because someone persuaded you. That's where Paul goes next. Did you notice in the text the word, "but" is used.

¹⁴ *And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.*

And then that great word, "but." Second argument, the argument from grace.

¹⁵ *But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace,* ¹⁶ *was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone (ESV)*

Remember whenever you see the word "but" you just delete whatever came before that. So Paul says, "I was zealous as a persecutor as the church. I was bad. But when God who had set me apart from birth . . ." The first thing you should notice here is as soon as you switch from verses 13 and 14 to 15 and 16 there is a pronoun change. When Paul's talking about his life before knowing Jesus everything is "I." "I persecuted the church. I was zealous. I was advancing. I was this. I was that." As soon as he's converted after the "but" all you hear is "He." "He changed me. He set me apart. He revealed His Son to me. He." That is God. One of the ways you know you are starting to understand the gospel is when you begin to use the word "I" less and start to use the word "He" more, because you realize that you bring very little to the table. That's the first thing Paul says, "He who set me apart from birth . . ." Do you think God had a plan for Paul's life? Does that strike you as odd? Some people are uncomfortable with that. Yet Paul wasn't. Paul said, "The reason I'm here is because God set me apart from birth." You hear me say it every single Sunday. "God always initiates with sinners." When I say that, I don't mean just in the Order of Worship. I mean, if your eyes are open to see the gospel, it is because God set you apart before you were born, and what does he set you apart for? The same thing he set Paul apart for. He said, "And he called me according to His grace." What is grace? Grace is unmerited favor. In other words, why did God call Paul? No good reason, at least no good reason in Paul. There was nothing in Paul that would merit God calling him. God called him by His grace. It's interesting to me because the Call to Worship this morning was Psalm 23, and that's just out of the Lectionary. That's what is on the calendar for this time of year. The last line of Psalm 23 says, "And goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life." Really, a more accurate translation of that would be something like, "Goodness and mercy will stalk me all the days of my life." Or, "Goodness and mercy will hunt me down all the days of my life." That's a good thing. Most of us avoid goodness and mercy. We desperately say we want it and we avoid it. Yet the good news of the gospel is that (at least Psalm 23 says) you don't have to worry about it because if God wants to show you goodness and mercy He will stalk you until He finds you. It will hunt you down. When Paul says, "I'm called according to grace" it just struck me as ironic that now the hunter has become the hunted. The one who used to hunt down Christians and persecute them is now the hunted, and the thing that hunts him down is goodness and mercy and grace. What did God call him for? It says that He,

¹⁵ . . . *called me by his grace,* ¹⁶ *was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles . . . (ESV)*

So when God reveals His grace, the agent of God's grace is Jesus. The reason that God can show unmerited favor toward someone like Paul and to someone like me is because Jesus the Son has earned all the merit for us. Paul realizes that when Jesus went to the cross, Jesus bore the weight of the law. Jesus bore the weight of the wrath of God, and it was revealed that in Jesus everything was taken care of. Paul knew the Bible. He thought it was all up to him, but as soon as he saw Jesus and realized that Jesus had died for his sins and risen for his justification it all clicked and he realized that, "In him is where I find grace." Then the most interesting thing to me is the next part as he says, "And called me to preach to the Gentiles." When you really start to think about that and you

start to think about the whole Book of Acts it is completely and utterly backwards from what you and I would think. Here's Paul who is at the top of his class as far as Judaism, Phariseism, and knew the Bible better than anyone else. He could argue the Bible better than anyone else. And if you're sitting around having a session meeting, "We need to send someone to the Jews and someone to the Gentiles. Paul, you're pretty refined, you know the Bible, you could argue the Jews into a corner and you'd kill 'em. So where are we going to send you? Gentiles. Peter, you're a little bit rough, speak out of turn sometimes. You're not the most sophisticated; you're not the most savvy person in the world. Where are we going to send you? You're going to go to the Jews." Is that not backwards? Worldly wisdom would say, "Send the Hebrews of Hebrews to the Hebrews in order that he could argue." And you send the guy who cusses like a sailor to people who cuss like sailors. Yet in the providence of God He says, "Paul, you the one who has mastered Judaism, you go to the Gentiles, and Peter, the one who is the master of cussing (I guess), will go to the Jews." Remember I Corinthians says, "The foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of man." If Gentiles are converted through the ministry of Paul or if Jews are converted through the ministry of Peter what we know, among other things, is that God must have been the operator there and not Paul and not Peter, God is the one who does all the work. So Paul says, "I used to be this and now I'm not." That's one of the arguments. "God called me by His grace." That's another argument. The last argument is just a practical argument. Paul gives three different alibis as to why he couldn't have received his gospel from anyone but God.

¹⁷ *nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.*
¹⁸ *Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days.* ¹⁹ *But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother.* ²⁰ *(In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!)* ²¹ *Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. (ESV)*

If you're Jewish, Jerusalem is the center of the universe. Whenever you go to Jerusalem you always go "up" to Jerusalem no matter where you're going. If you're coming from north, south, east, or west it's always "up" to Jerusalem. So Paul is persecuting people, he's going to Damascus and right in the vicinity of Damascus that's where you read the story in Acts. Paul is knocked off his horse; he is converted. And what does he do immediately after he's converted? He does not (he says) go back to Jerusalem to figure out what he needs to know. Instead he goes to Arabia. He could have gone anywhere. He could have gone two blocks away from Damascus or he could have gone 200 miles away from Damascus, but Paul's point is that he basically went in the opposite direction of Jerusalem. He went for three years. It's interesting, and a lot of people speculate, "What did he do when he went to Arabia? Did he preach the gospel? Did he just go there for solitude?" I read something interesting yesterday. I think it was John Stott speculating that Paul went to the wilderness for three years to make up for the three years that he didn't get with Jesus and the original disciples. In other words, Jesus spent three years with the original twelve and now Paul is spending three years with Jesus all to himself. Either way, whatever he did there we're not sure, but he was there for three years. So he couldn't have gotten the gospel in Jerusalem. After Arabia he goes to Jerusalem and meets Peter and James. He's there for about two weeks. In the language there, he says, "I went to visit them," meaning something like "visit," at least if you're southern. If you're southern and you go to visit people, you just go to chew the fat and get to know them better. When you say, in the south at least, "I'm going to visit someone" it doesn't mean, "I'm going to receive instruction at the feet of them." It means, "We're going to chew the fat." He says, "I went to Jerusalem for two weeks to chew the fat with Peter." During that time we assume they compared notes and we know from other parts of the Bible that they agreed. "Paul, what you're preaching is in fact the truth." But Paul's point is that in two weeks they couldn't have taught him everything he knew. So after two weeks with Peter what does he do? He goes to Cilicia and Syria, and Galatia is right above Cilicia, by the way. How long is he there? He's there for fourteen years. So at least by the time of this writing, probably more time, Paul is saying, "In seventeen years since the time I became a Christian I've only been to Jerusalem one time and I was there for two weeks, and I talked to Peter and James. That's it. I didn't get all this stuff from them. I got it from Jesus directly." So what's his point? Notice the last parts,

²² *And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ.* ²³ *They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy."* ²⁴ *And they glorified God because of me.*

In other words, when he's traveling to Syria and Cilicia and these outlying regions, he's saying, "I couldn't have gotten the gospel from them either because they didn't even know me in person. They didn't know me by face. I didn't sit down with someone else, and they didn't teach me the gospel either. In fact, exactly contrary to that happened. They heard about me. They heard that the one who used to persecute the church is now preaching." And what did they do? "Aw, I don't believe that. I don't buy that. Jesus can't change anybody. I mean he changed me but he can't change someone like Paul. Paul's too bad." They didn't say that. They said, "They heard of me and they glorified God because of me."

Now, notice it says they didn't glorify God because of the gospel. Paul says, "They glorified God because of me." What does he mean by that? I think as I read that the first thing that came to mind was an experience I had probably seven or eight years ago now in Colorado. My best friend, Paul Warren, and I were at a baseball game. Actually we were at General Assembly in Denver, and Paul is one of those guys who wants to see every baseball park in the country before he dies. I'm sort of like, "Yeah, I go to Safeco Field a couple of times a year. I'm good." We're at General Assembly and he says, "Hey, let's go catch a baseball game at Rockies Stadium." I said, "Great! Maybe while we're there we can see my friend Danny." He said, "Danny who?" I said, "Danny Bichette." He said, "They have a Dante Bichette on the team." "Danny, Dante, whatever. He and I played baseball from the time I was in third grade." He's like, "You know Dante Bichette?" "Why would I say otherwise?" He's like, "I don't believe you." I say, "Okay. Fine." So we went to the game. I said, "Now, if I'm going to meet a baseball player, where would I go shout him out?" Paul said, "Well, right down there by the first base line where the kids are trying to get autographs." So we went down to the first base line and as we did, players were running out one by one and apparently a lot of them can't sign autographs because they have contracts that prevent them from this kind of thing. So as players are streaming out, the kids are yelling for them and finally Dante Bichette comes running out and his back is turned to the crowd and everyone is going, "Dante, Dante, Dante." And I thought, "Well, it worked when I was a kid." I went, "Dannyyyyyyyyyyyyyy" and as soon as I yelled "Danny" he stopped dead in his tracks at about first base and turned around and said, "Tommyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy." And he came running back to the first-base line and stood there and started signing baseballs. He's talking to me, "How's your mom doing? I haven't seen her for ten years. How's your sister, Katy? How's Amy doing? What are you doing now?" We talked for about ten minutes. The coach goes, "Hey, you've got to get out there." So he goes running out to the field. That wasn't the interesting part of the story, besides Paul was more quiet than I've ever seen him. It was after the fact, after all this was over a man and his son came up and the guy was literally teary-eyed and he said, "I just want to thank you." I said, "Thank me for what?" He said, "My son has been collecting player autographs and he's had every player's autograph for two years and he's never been able to get Bichette's, and today he got Bichette's." And they glorified God because of me.

That's what Paul's getting at here, by the way. It's not that I did anything other than connect them with the only person who could help them. That's it. That father and son didn't even know my name. They probably don't even care. What they cared about is that they got what they needed. They got what could help them. That's exactly why people glorified God because of Paul. It's not because of who Paul was; it was because of who Paul could connect them to. "I connected them to Jesus. I connected them to the one who could help them, and because of that they glorified God because of me." That should tell you that, on one hand, we should have great humility. It really is all about God. On the other hand, we do have great responsibility. Who can say that about us: they glorify God because of me? Think about that.