**Mere Christianity**

Galatians 2:1-10

**Introduction**

Alright everyone, it’s good seeing you all. We are jumping back into our *I Promise I Won’t Go Long* series. In case you missed it or didn’t know, this will be my last preaching series. And my burden for this series isn’t necessarily to go short, which is ironic, but to use this last sermon series as your pastor to talk about things that I wish I had a chance to talk about earlier *or* to help you think through some of the things that I’ve seen and witnessed in the American church over the years.

In a few months, I’ll do a message on cultivating spiritual rhythms as a means by which we maintain our relationship with God. That’s the message that I wished I talked more about earlier on as your pastor. I realized that just because praying and reading the Bible is something that you’re told to do all your life doesn’t mean that I shouldn’t encourage it.

But tonight’s message is actually something that I’ve been thinking about for a while now, before the pandemic but has actually heightened because of the pandemic.

To start our time, I’m going to have us read from Galatians 2:1-10. Once you’re there, I’m going to pray.

**Scripture Reading**

**2**Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. **2**I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. **3**But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. **4**Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery— **5**to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. **6**And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. **7**On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised **8**(for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), **9**and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. **10**Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

**11**But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. **12**For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. **13**And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. **14**But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

**Opening Question**

How do you know if someone is ‘in’, or ‘out’? How do you know which tribe or group you belong to?

**Opening Illustration**

This is more just an anecdote, but 4 years ago, Megan and I, and a couple of friends of ours, who are also Asian American, traveled to Japan for vacation. We got in early afternoon, so we checked into our Airbnb, dropped off our luggage, washed up, so we didn’t look like we just got off of a 12-hour plane ride, and headed out to dinner.

And right when we were seated at the restaurant, we were handed English menus in a mainly Japanese national-occupied restaurant. Obviously, none of us took any offense, except for maybe one of them, because she’s actually Japanese, but in retrospect, how did the servers know that we weren’t from there? Was it the way we looked? Did we look that disheveled from our flight? Or the way we dressed? Or how loud we were talking? Or was it just like a vibe that we were giving off?

There was another time on the trip when we were at a coffee shop in Tokyo and James Choi, oops, wanted to ask one of the servers if they knew how to surf. So he asked our friend Cindy, how to say, “Can you surf?” in Japanese. And in the most cringe 30 seconds of my life, James asked one of the baristas, “Can you surf?” in the most botched Japanese I have ever heard. To which the barista replied in perfect *English*, “Yeah I can surf, we all surf.” He didn’t even bother responding back in Japanese. I mean, it was obvious that we weren’t Japanese.

**Create the need**

But going back to the original question, how do you know if someone is ‘in’, or ‘out’? How do you know which tribe or group you belong to? What factors determine if someone is in or out? Is it when people take their shoes off, or leave them on, when they enter your home? Is it by what they post on social media? Is it by what they affirm or deny? Is it by how they dress?

Now let me ask you. How do you know if someone is a Christian? In your mind, what are the factors that determine whether someone is a Christian or not? Is it because they attend church? Or they don’t cuss? Or is it connected to cultural and social issues? Is someone a Christian because they voted for this person as opposed to this other person? Or is it their views or hot takes on today’s hottest cultural issues? Or is it theology or doctrine? Which is it? ? It’s a lot harder than we think, isn’t it, especially in our polarized world?

But I think the reason why it’s a lot harder to tell is precisely because of our polarized world. Something that I’m witnessing as a pastor and just as a Christian is the increased division and fracturing of the evangelical church. I’ve noticed slowly over the years, but especially in the last couple of years, that lines are being drawn to determine who’s truly a Christian and who isn’t, who’s in and who’s out.

And what I’m noticing is that it isn’t just that you must believe Jesus died for your sins and rose again three days later. It’s that you must also believe this or that about ‘x’, or you must advocate for this ‘y’ political concern. Of course, we would never explicitly say that. But it’s a subtle expectation. We determine not on the basis of one’s repentance but on one’s confession to a cultural creed—either on the conservative or the liberal side.

So belief in Jesus seems to *require* a certain set of additional beliefs in a political spectrum. But when we do that, we conflate the gospel with our preferred culture and we demand that *in order to be a Christian*, *in order to be in,* you must also subscribe to a particular set of theological, or sociological or political constructs.

And of course, we would never say that we believe this, but we kind of act as if we do. Lighthouse’s membership covenants don’t require it, but in order to be “in” socially, you gotta dress this way, you need to drink Ethiopian coffee only, you need to wear this clothing brand, you need to think this way about counseling or psychology, you need to own or have read this book. You ever notice how almost everyone at Lighthouse dresses the same way?

And when we do that, we destroy the gospel. We undermine the gospel. We are saying that the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus is not enough. This is what is at stake. And this has been my burden as I step down from pastoral ministry. At the very core, who is a Christian? Or as C.S. Lewis wisely titled it, “who is a *mere* Christian?” What are the essential things that make a Christian a Christian?

**Transition**

The apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians is his answer to that question. In our passage, the apostle Paul tells us who a *mere* Christian is.

**Key Idea**

A mere Christian simply believes the truth of the good news

1. **A mere Christian believes the truth of the good news (vv. 1-10)**

Since we’re right in the middle of the apostle Paul’s letter, we need just a little bit of context to understand what he’s talking about. Galatians is chronologically the first of the apostle Paul’s letters but it’s also his spiciest. Paul finds out that certain enemies of the gospel have infiltrated the Galatian church communities and have been persuading these Christians that they need to act like Jews in order to belong to the family of Jesus. As you can imagine, Paul was pissed.

This is how he starts his letter.

**6**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— **7**not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. **8**But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. **9**As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

Spicy, right? Paul was afraid that the Galatians were believing in not just a different gospel, but a distorted gospel altogether. There is no other gospel except the free invitation to no longer trust in yourself, but to trust in Jesus Christ. This is the good news of the gospel.

The good news of the gospel is that you can be cleansed and forgiven of your sin and your unrighteousness not by self-atonement but by the atoning death of Jesus Christ. The good news of the gospel is that it is not about improving yourself, but forgetting yourself and turning to Jesus Christ.

And the subtle distortion of the gospel is that you need to do more. In order to be a true Christian, you need to be circumcised. You need to adhere to the Mosaic tradition. You need to believe in the oral tradition of the Pharisees. You need to do this. You need to not do this. You need to believe this. You need to not believe this. But the distortion of the gospel said more than just what you needed to do—it fundamentally said that Jesus alone is not enough. Paul feared that the Galatians were turning toward a false gospel, not the true gospel.

Paul knew that he was preaching the true and pure gospel, but he takes a trip to the church in Jerusalem and meets with Peter, James, and John, Jesus’ disciples, to get backup from them.

Take a look at verses 1-2.

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. **2**I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain.

As an apostle who received direct revelation from God, Paul didn’t need the other apostles’ approval. They were on the same level. But the reason why he visits the apostles in Jerusalem is because he wants back up that Gentiles didn’t need to be Jewish in order to become Christians. He wants their endorsement that Gentiles *could be* a part of the family of God *even if* they didn’t share in the signs and symbols that mark out Jewish identity. Which is the reason why Paul brought Titus with him.

Titus was the ideal test hypothesis. Circumcision symbolized Jewish identity in a pagan world. It’s therefore not surprising that circumcision became a symbolic hot-button issue for early Christian communities struggling with how to define their identity.

So here’s the question. Would the Jewish apostles require Titus to be circumcised? In order to be a part of the family of God, would Titus a Gentile need to follow the Mosaic law *in order* to be a Christian or is belief in Jesus enough?

Take a look at verses 4-5.

**4**Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery— **5**to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

The apostle Paul tells us that there were traitors who spied in on the meeting. This is kind of shady. This was a high stakes meeting and they wanted to see how the apostles would respond. If the apostles from Jerusalem said yes, then there would have been two hostile parties within early Christianity on the fundamental point of whether we need to add external behaviors to internal belief in Jesus in order to be saved. This was what was at stake in Titus the case study. So how did they respond?

Now take a look at verse 3.

**3**But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek.

By not forcing Titus to be circumcised, the Jerusalem apostles essentially agreed that Gentiles didn’t have to practice Jewish customs in order to be a Christian. By not forcing Titus to be circumcised, the Jerusalem apostles recognized that uncircumcised Gentiles can be a part of the family of God simply on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ.

The Jerusalem apostles’ acceptance of Titus as a member of the family of God established that the church was not defined by the exclusive marks of Judaism, but wholly, totally, and only by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and that Gentiles could be members of this community, no less than the Jews.

Now, that was a very long, but in my opinion necessary, explanation to get to the point that, what makes someone a Christian, or a *mere* Christian, is someone who has simply cast themselves wholly upon Jesus Christ for their salvation.

What is necessary, what is essential, what is primary for a right relationship with God is not external behavior, but simply trust in God through Jesus Christ. That’s it. This is the truth of the good news. This is what makes the good news good. The truth is that the gospel is free! The good news of Jesus is life-giving.

The good news of Jesus meets you where you are. You don’t have to climb to where Jesus is. It doesn’t require you to reach him. The whole point of the gospel is that we can’t. The whole point of the gospel is that Jesus has come down. God does not expect you to fix yourself, to clean yourself up, to get it together. The free invitation of the good news is simply, “Come to me as you are and I will give you rest for your soul.” This is the pure and true gospel.

And that just as Titus was not forced to be circumcised to be a Christian, we must never insist on additions to gospel belief to be a Christian. To be sure, there are requirements that the gospel will demand of us. But those requirements are never required *in order* to become a Christian. There will be applications of the gospel that we must live out, but those applications are never attached *in order* to become a Christian.

This is what theologian Sinclair Ferguson writes, “It’s the subtle thought that my growth in holiness strengthens my justification. Confirm it? Yes. But strengthen it? Never!”

When you take the fruit of sanctification and make them requirements for justification, you have destroyed the gospel. When you require what people ought to do in the Christian life *as the requirement* to enter into a relationship with Jesus, then you have distorted the gospel.

But let’s get a bit more concrete. The examples are endless, but let me just give you a couple.

None of us outrightly say this, but we act like it. When you start saying that to be a Christian, you must believe this or that about modern culture, and then judge them when people don’t, that’s a distortion of the gospel. When you say that you must believe this about CRT or not believe this about CRT, and then question someone’s salvation because they do or don’t, that’s a distortion of the gospel. When you start assuming certain things about what sorts of Christians people are on the basis of mask wearing, or vaccination status, or whatever, that’s a distortion of the gospel. The list can go on and on.

My point and, something that I have noticed, is that some of us have taken our moral taste buds and preferences, which may or may not be informed by Scripture, and concluded that they must also be God’s moral taste buds and preferences.

Like there’s a pastor that I personally know, who used the pulpit, the place where the Word of God ought to be proclaimed, as a platform to encourage members that good Christians vote for ‘x’ presidential candidate. But when we do this, we are inadvertently binding Christian belief to a political movement. And that’s a distortion of the gospel.

When we recruit Jesus to be on our team and to be against Christians who have different values and convictions than us, when we start drawing very concrete lines around non-gospel issues, we aren’t maintaining the purity of the gospel, but distorting it.

This doesn’t mean that we’re indifferent to secondary values and convictions as we’ll see later on. This doesn’t mean that values and convictions are unimportant. But we have assumed that certain values and convictions, whether political or theological, are what define a Christian.

Paul Hiebert was one of the premier missionary statemen of the previous generation, who went to Western Africa as a missionary and when he was there, his surprising revelation was that what he brought to the mission field wasn’t the gospel, but really just American culture shrouded in religious language.

This is what he writes in his book *The Gospel in Human Context*.

“As Christians, we are often unaware that our beliefs are frequently shaped more by our culture than by the gospel. We take our Christianity to be biblically based and normative for everyone. We do not stop to ask what parts of it come from our sociocultural and historical contexts and what parts come from Scripture. We fail to recognize that many of the assumptions and values that underlie our culture are not biblically based, they are our human creations.”

Here’s what’s at stake. If we aren’t clear on what Scripture describes as a Christian, then like the false teachers in Galatia, we will alienate people from Jesus, because what we are saying is that in order to follow Jesus, you also have to believe that biblical counseling is the best, or that pour over coffee is the only coffee that you should drink, or that you have to attend a church that does expository preaching. All of these things are great things by the way. I’m not knocking these things. But they are not the basis for Christian belonging and belief. The basis for Christian belonging and belief again is Jesus.

What defines a Christian fundamentally is their belief, their hope, and their trust in Jesus Christ alone for their salvation. And, of course, there are specific convictions and values that flow from that—like biblical doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation, or a commitment to the local church, or a unique sexual ethic, or a neighborly concern for the poor and the oppressed as verse 10 describes. But all of that *comes after* belief, not *prior* to belief.

Now, just to be clear. We don’t prize faith over works. The opposite of our works isn’t our faith. The opposite of our works is Jesus’ complete and sufficient work.

The alternative to “trusting in your own works” isn’t “trusting in your own faith.” That’s like saying you believe in belief. What are you, Ted Lasso? Faith is a byproduct of responding to Jesus. It’s not like God prefers mental work over external work. God really likes good works. Loving God and our neighbor are totally awesome in his book.

But the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the doctrine that we are declared righteous by God through faith, doesn’t prefer mental works over physical ones. It says the only work that is necessary to come to God is Jesus’ work, not yours. And when we rest in that, we call that faith.

In other words, faith isn’t something that we conjure up or summon out of ourselves by any mental or internal effort. Faith is pulled out of us by the finished work of Jesus. Faith is merely the byproduct that comes as a result of looking to Jesus alone for our salvation. We aren’t saved by having trust in our hearts—that isn’t what saves. We are saved by having Jesus in our hearts whom we respond to in faith. That is the truth of the good news that the apostle Paul so desperately wants to preserve. And it is preserved.

Take a look at verses 6-9.

**6**And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. **7**On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised **8**(for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), **9**and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

Just to get the elephant in the room out of the way, it sounds like Paul is kind of salty about the apostles. He always talks about them in a backhanded way—they “seemed to be influential, they seemed to be pillars.” The apostle Paul definitely saw himself on the same level as the apostles, but the reason why Paul talks about them in a backhanded way isn’t because he doesn’t respect them, but because he didn’t want the Galatian church to idolize them.

But the overall point that the apostle Paul is making in these four verses is that James, Cephas, and John were all in agreement with Paul. Paul wasn’t preaching some different version of the gospel, like a gospel 2.0 or something. In fact, they doubled down on it. In verse 6, Paul says that they added nothing to me, which makes it sound like their opinion doesn’t matter to Paul, but contextually, what he’s actually saying is that the apostles added no essential requirement to Paul’s gospel. This is how one commentator describes it, “Thus there are two missions in which the one gospel is making its way into the whole of the cosmos.”

And the fact that they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and Paul proves that someone like Titus can be spiritual clean and acceptable to God through Jesus Christ, and not through any deed or ritual.

Before we move on, if you take a look at verse 9 again, it’s important to also point out that including Barnabas and Paul in the fellowship also meant excluding the false teachers from the fellowship. The Jerusalem apostles didn’t give their right hand of fellowship to everyone. This implies that there are necessary and essential things that you must believe in order to be a *mere* Christian. The apostle Paul describes the gospel as something that is of first importance.

But while all doctrines of Christian belief are in some way connected to the gospel, not all doctrines of Christian belief are equally important. I don’t have enough time to go through all of them, but Pastor Gavin Ortlund has a fourfold ranking that helps us determine whether something is gospel essential or gospel secondary. He describes that:

* **First-rank** doctrines are *essential* to the gospel itself
  + These doctrines include the Trinity, the sufficiency of Scripture, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the virgin birth of Jesus the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the fall and its effects
* **Second-rank** doctrines are *urgent* for the health and practice of the church such that they frequently cause Christians to leave their churches
  + These doctrines include creation, baptism, men and women roles, spiritual gifts
* **Third-rank** doctrines are *important* to Christian theology, but not enough to justify leaving or dividing churches
  + These doctrines include views on the end-times, or how long creation took. This is where I would personally rank some political issues.
* **Fourth-rank** doctrines are *unimportant,* or shouldn’t be important,to our gospel witness and ministry collaboration
  + These issues include the color of the Sunday programs, what paper it’s printed on, what musical instruments are played on a Sunday. These may be practically relevant but they’re not theologically important.

Now, I do want to clarify, because it sounds like the first-rank doctrines require that we affirm them before we become Christians, which would contradict everything that I’ve been talking about.

While first-rank doctrines are essential to the gospel they are not necessary to be fully articulated or affirmed prior to salvation. Would a 16-year-old be required to articulate the relationship between the divine and human natures of Jesus before their salvation can be genuine? Or would an 8-year-old who says she wants to give her life to Jesus be expected to articulate the perichoretic relations between the Persons of the Trinity or the eternal relations of origins of the Son and the Spirit? Of course not. You guys don’t even know what I’m talking about.

To be sure, these first-rank doctrines *are* essential to the gospel and a confession of the gospel implies these doctrines and we grow in their understanding of these doctrines over time, but it’s practically impossible to require that every Christian affirm every first-rank doctrine at the moment of his or her conversion.

What has actually united the historic church for almost two millennia was the Apostle’s Creed. Encapsulated within the Apostle’s Creed was what C.S. Lewis described *Mere Christianity.*

It’s *mere* because it’s what Christians from all ages have at the core and at its essence believed.

The Apostle’s Creed says, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell (which is just the grave); on the third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father and he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church (catholic just means universal), the church across all ages, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the bod, and the life everlasting, amen.” This is *mere* Christianity.

Going back to verse 9, the broader point is that Gentiles could become full members of the people of God without becoming Jewish in custom or culture. This is what Tim Keller writes, “Christian unity takes no account of cultural distinctives and is not contingent on cultural similarity.”

In fact, Paul has repeatedly said this throughout Galatians that neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation (6:15). For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love (5:6).

Outward signs isn’t what counts. What counts at the end of the day is whether you are on the path of life or whether you’re on the path of death. We draw dividing lines between sports teams, socioeconomic status, social class, personal preferences, but the line that God draws is whether you are an old creation or a new creation. The dividing line that God draws is whether you are on the path of life or on the path of death. You are either spiritually dead or spiritually alive. Everything else may be important but it is secondary relative to this fundamental line.

Everyone in this gym, you are either an old creation or a new one, that is the dividing line. And if you are in Jesus Christ, independent of who you are from, what you’ve done, what you believe about x, y, z, thing, if you are in Christ, if your hope is in him, if he is your life, then you are a new creation. The old has passed and the new has come. And the free offer of the good news is that you can be a new creation through Jesus Christ right now.

You don’t need to sign a document. You don’t need to share your testimony. You don’t need to drink black coffee, you can still drink your boba or your Starbucks strawberry, passionfruit frappe, or whatever you guys drink. Actually the whole point of the gospel is that you don’t need to do anything to be with God. Come to Jesus and find your life in him and not in yourself. His yoke is easy and his burden is light. This is *mere* Christianity.

Take a look finally at verse 10.

**10**Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

Despite the distinct audiences that Peter and Paul preached the same gospel to, whether they were to preach to either Jew or Gentile, they are unanimous in this distinct application of the gospel. This might seem like a random throwaway line, but it’s actually a fitting culmination to all that the apostle Paul has talked about so far.

The poor here are likely not the poor in general, but more specifically the poor saints in Jerusalem. Paul had just been sent with Barnabas on a mission to bring aid to the poor in Jerusalem and the Jerusalem leaders are asking him to make sure that he does not forget them and throughout Paul's epistles we see his concern to gather funds for the saints in Jerusalem.

The collection for the poor Judean saints is a task with a theological impulse behind it. It expresses the concern of the Gentiles for the Jews and is a powerful manifestation of the unity of the church as a single body of mutual concern. In other words, the practical way that a *mere* Christian, who has believed in Jesus, works out their salvation is by how they care for the poor, the disenfranchised, the marginalized, the ones who have no one else looking out for them. As you look at this high school group, are there people on the fringes?

As *mere* Christians, the first step is that God took initiative, saw our poverty, and though he was rich became poor for us. The second step is like it, we take initiative and look to the needs around us. The gospel brings us into a social reality with God and it constitutes us as a social reality as the church for the purpose of propelling us into a social reality with the wider world. I don’t understand how some people say that the gospel *isn’t* connected to social concerns. It’s literally in verse 10. The truth of the gospel is that it transforms. It transforms our relationship with God and it transforms our relationships with others. This is the power of the gospel. This is *Mere Christianity*.