Galatians 1:10-24

For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. 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. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, 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; 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. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.

Prayer

Fallen condition focus: Who's approval are we really seeking?

Fifteen years ago, DreamWorks Studios released the original "How to Train Your Dragon" movie in theaters and I must admit its one of my favorites. It is a fun, coming-of-age story with clear elements of self-sacrifice, and even some Christ-like imagery. But one thing that struck me as I rewatched it again this summer. For each of the main characters, you could ask this simple question: Who's approval are they really seeking?

Because of this movie's writing, the answer to that question is straightforward. The main character is looking for both his father's approval and that of the villagers. For his father, initially he appears to need the villager's approval, but it turns out its more about his son and his deceased wife. For the main friend, there is an undercurrent of unworthiness that needs to removal at any cost, even to the point of abandoning all her friendships.

I won't spoil the story on how these issues get resolved, but the more I've thought about it, the more it seems that Paul is asking us the same question that the characters in "How to Train Your Dragon" should have been asking: Who's approval are we seeking?

You don't have to be a rocket scientist to see where that thought comes from. Look again at verse 10: **For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.**

Such a statement should drive some questions. First why is Paul even asking this rhetorical question? Second how should the question impact us here in La Crescent MN in September 2025?

To answer the first question, think back to Ryan's last two sermons. Think about the seriousness of the gospel. Think about the insurmountable gap between us and God. And think about the overwhelming good news that God has made a way for us to be reconciled to him. Think of Paul's strong, almost harsh condemnation toward false teachers. The bottom line is that in nine short verses, Paul has already laid out some blunt truths and will continue to do so throughout the letter. For Paul the gospel is non-negotiable. We have seen it cannot be Jesus plus something else. It has to be. It must be. It can only be salvation in Christ alone, through grace alone by faith alone. This is what drives Paul both here and throughout his ministry. Why? Because he is a servant of Christ.

But what about us? The heart of this sermon is to answer this second question? **Whose approval are we truly seeking?** Seriously. We each need to know. Just like the characters in "How to Train Your Dragon", we need to unmask whose approval we are really after.

You may ask why is this so important? Why do you care so much? Why does Paul seem to care so much? In Paul's eyes the world is black and white. There is Christ and his kingdom and there is everything else. The world is alluring. The world is ever present. The world offers false hope and makes promises it can't possibly keep. And many fall into its trap. Even believers. The main point of Galatians is to wake us up to the lie that once we are saved, we need to keep ourselves in the kingdom. Saved by Christ but perfected by works. To say otherwise is to offend the religious among us. To say otherwise crashes a multi-million-dollar Christian self-help industry. To say otherwise, causes us to abandon our own "I can do it myself" attitudes toward our own holiness and humbly seek the help of the Spirit and those around us so that we may each grow toward mature manhood and womanhood in Christ.

Paul answers this question of approval in three layers, and they each are necessary as we navigate the reality that we are always seeking someone's approval. The layers Paul places in front of us are these:

- It is God's gospel, not man's
- Our redemption is radical, even if we don't notice it or see it that way.
- Others can help us, but we must be discerning.

In thinking about approval, we need to be careful. I caught myself falling into this trap: God's approval? Of course that's what I'm seeking. But the more I reflected on the question of approval, the more I realized I'm often not actually seeking God's approval but man's. And I would dare say that I am not alone.

So, what do we do about this fallen condition we find ourselves in? How do we approach this on-going situation that we face? Paul's first layer for us to consider and to absorb into our hearts and minds is that the gospel is not from man but from God.

It's God's gospel not man's

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

As we face the approval monster, as we wrestle with what others think of us, God's word makes it clear that what we need to know is that this God's gospel not ours. But the question we should be asking is why? Why does the source matter? How does God's authorship redirect our vision away from what others think of us and onto what God thinks of us?

Here are a few thoughts to consider:

First, the glory goes to the author. This is true even in secular society. If I would pass off the "Lord of the Rings" as my latest story that I wrote, what would be the immediate cry of everyone? Plagiarism. Why? Because someone else, namely J.R.R. Tolkien, wrote that book. He deserves the honor, and all the accolades belong to him.

If such is true of a story written by a man how much truer is it for the message that has eternal implications? Since Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith, it stands to reason that he should receive all the glory tied to the gospel. And if the glory is his, where does our focus belong?

The next thought is that the power comes from the source. I must admit, I don't know each of your stories as much as I would like. Most significantly, how you came to Christ. But there is something I do know. Once you were blind. And now you see. How did that happen? What amount of spiritual eye surgery were you able to perform to open your own eyes to the grace and mercy of Jesus. None, right? A few weeks ago, Steve Thompson opened our service with **Colossians 1:13-14: [God] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.** In different words, Paul is saying the same thing: this is God's gospel, not man's because he is the source of its power.

One final consideration: The dependability of the message is tied to the the dependability of the messenger. How often do we search the internet for answers to a wide range of questions. In our house we are constantly searching for what dogs can and cannot eat. Another thing I'm researching is retirement planning. But for these and a thousand other items there is always this question: how reliable is the source? If the source for what can dogs eat is AKC.org, that seems fairly reliable. But what if the source was Joe's veterinary services? Then there are times when sources conflict. I have found many certified financial planners who disagree on when one should start taking social security.

As important as these questions may be, there is one question that overshadows every other question. As Ryan has told us over the past two weeks, this question is the heartbeat of Galatians: how can I be right with God? The reliability of that answer matters more than anything else. And thank God, he himself has answered that question. Just look at a few of over a hundred of verses I could place in front of you:

Ezekiel 34:11-12 "For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

Hebrews 1:1-2 Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

John 14:6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

John 10:27-30 "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one."

Our redemption is radical, even if we don't notice see it that way.

As the Spirit makes it clearer and clearer to us that this gospel is God's gospel and not something mankind invented, we can look at how the gospel worked itself out in our own lives. And whether we can see it or not, there was (and is) a radical shift from who we were to who we are now.

If you know the story of "How to Train your Dragon" you know this is true of each of the main characters. The son realizes his whole identity was caught up in trying to please his dad and the townspeople rather than living out who he was created to be. The father realized he

was trying to shape his son into something he could never become while also trying to be a savior of a people when that was not his role. And the friend saw her value didn't come from winning at all costs, but from helping her friends succeed in what they were most gifted in. When this clarity came to each of them, the change in how they lived and interacted was profound.

Consider Paul's own story as he lays it out here: **Galatians 1:13-17 For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. 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. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, 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; 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.**

If there is any conversion story in history that was radical, it was Paul's. We see this throughout the book of Acts. As a Pharisee, his very ministry was to capture, torture and arrange for the execution of the Christians of his day. On top of that he was on the fast track for a high level of leadership within Judaism itself. Perhaps even to be high priest. What's more, Paul knew this was his reality. And yet when he met Jesus on the road to Damascus, his whole life changed. Not just spiritually but in the here and now as well. From this passage we get a hint that he walked away from his meteoric rise in Judaism. He walked away from the sources of learning that once defined him and went into the wilderness. Why? So that he could hear from God and not have the undue influence of mankind.

We can add to this to what he says in **Philippians 3:4-7 though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.** All his advantage, all his heritage, all his internal passion was set aside for the sake of Christ. This is a radical change.

What about us? How radical was our change? Please don't misunderstand the question. I'm not asking if your testimony is as dramatic or as sudden as Paul's appears to have been. It could be, but it is also possible that you were a pretty good person before and you're a pretty good person now. You likely didn't quit your job, walk away from your family heritage or reorient the entire mission of your life. And yet I would maintain that the impact of the gospel on our lives here and now has been radical if we look into it for just a minute.

I would like to take a little time to consider my testimony. Not because it is extraordinary but because it's ordinary. Yet under that ordinariness is the radicalness that God is working in each one of our lives.

The first thing to know about me is that I was a good kid from a good family, with a solid religious background. I was not saved but I had working knowledge Jesus' life, death and resurrection. But I had one big flaw in my inch deep theology: while God's grace was a necessary enabler of salvation, I mistakenly believed my righteous works completed the equation. And then by definition, any sin damaged and could even ruin that same salvation.

But then in the fall of 1991 God broke through this illusion. He showed me that every sin, big or small, unique or repetitive, intentional or unintentional, destroyed any hope of salvation. Left alone I was lost and without hope in the word. But the Spirit also made it clear that Jesus died for each and every sin I ever committed. Because of him, even though I was lost, he found me. Even though I was in the most desperate state, he recused me. Even though Satan had a rightful claim on my life, Jesus paid the price and freed me from the prison of my sin and shame.

Here's the interesting thing. One could say that on the outside very little changed. I was a good kid before and was a good kid after. We were a church going family and continued to do so after. I loved God before and loved him after.

And yet, underneath everything was different. There was now an ache in my heart to know Jesus and to learn from his word. Attending church became a privilege rather than duty. Serving people, especially the family of God went from a means of merit to a call on my heart. And prayer. Over time prayer went from negotiations to communications to intimate fellowship with my Abba, Father.

I could go on, but my point is this: my story, Paul's story is replicated 100 or more times in this room. Some of us may have a radical conversion story. Many of us do not. But each one of us who have placed our faith in Christ, who have trusted in Jesus alone for salvation are radically different than who we were before Jesus came into our lives.

Before I move on, I would remiss not to speak to any in the room or online who have not yet taken that step of faith. It is one thing to believe that God exists, that he is both holy and just, and that he is well within his right to judge sin. It is one thing to believe that you are a sinner both by nature and by choice and that this holy and just God can and will judge you for your sins. This knowledge is necessary but not sufficient for salvation. As James reminds us, **You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!**

This truth needs to sink from your head to your heart. You need to see, to believe, that without Christ you are indeed lost, imprisoned, condemned, indeed dead in your sins. But the good news is that the Jesus died for you! Will you believe it? He longs to bring you home! Think of the father of the prodigal son. He ran to his son while he was still on his way home. Or think of God's own words from the prophet Ezekiel: **"For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live."**

I would ask, in this moment, pray with me…

Others can help us, but we must be discerning

There is one more layer Paul stresses about how we can move from seeking people's approval to seeking God's approval.

Galatians 1:18-24

Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.

One would think that to avoid the temptation and lure of seeking others approval, we should isolate ourselves. And in fact, that is what Paul did in verses 16 and 17. Yet something changed. Paul does not say what changed, so speculating would not be helpful. But what is helpful is to see that Paul knew he needed to interact with the rest of the Christian community.

What's interesting here is that Paul stresses an almost exclusive interaction with the leadership of the church. He met with Peter and James. That's it. Did he preach? He doesn't say. Did he debate in the temple courts? He doesn't say. Did he visit his old friends and colleagues? It is totally unclear. Why are there no details about his time in Jerusalem? Quite frankly, the Spirit didn't think we needed them.

Yet just like the main characters in "How to Train Your Dragon" couldn't have reached their final destination without a key friend or two, neither could Paul and neither can we. Here's what we do need: Seeing of one of the brightest men in Judaism conferring with a fisherman and the brother of a dead carpenter. What's up with that? It displays a very deep reality about our journey with Christ: we can't do it alone and those who help us may be radically difference than us. We need the Holy Spirit. Jesus makes that clear in John 16 and

Paul himself states it here in Galatians, in 1 Corinthians, and elsewhere. But we also need each other.

But notice this: Paul was selective in whom he sought guidance. He didn't go to the masses. He didn't avail himself of social media. He didn't follow the latest trends. Instead, he aligned with two trusted brothers.

This is where our own brothers and sisters in Christ can help us as we strive against seeking man's approval and instead seek God's approval. They can point us back to the gospel. They can remind us of our great need and that Jesus is a bigger savior than we are sinners. And they can point out things in our lives that don't align with the truth of God's word

Conclusion: God is glorified as we love and serve him, proclaiming the faith we once tried to destroy

So where does that leave us? If we truly want to seek God's approval rather than man's approval, we need to remember that the gospel we've embraced and proclaim is God's gospel. It was his plan from the beginning. It was Jesus' work on the cross for us. It was and is the Spirit's activity in our hearts and minds that drew us and keeps us. We need to remember that every conversion story, including our own, is a radical story. Each believer has been rescued from the domain and dominion of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God's beloved Son. We need to pursue godly yet discerning relationships within our Christian community. It is amazing how much we can learn from what God has taught others in their respective journeys with Christ.

There is one last thing that flows from our allegiance to God and not to men and the radical change that brings into our lives. People will see it, and it will bring glory to God. Brothers. Sisters. Hear these words: **Galatians 1:23-24 "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.**

Let that be our epitaph: They glorified God because of me.

Prayer