

When I was a senior in high school, there was a watch that was all the rage. Everybody that I knew wanted one. As I look back and remember, the thing was actually kind of garish, really. It had a gold dial and the face of the thing was three vertical colors, red, green and blue, I believe. I mean, objectively, the thing looked awful but, what can I tell you? It was all the rage way back in 1989. That year we also happened to take our Senior Class Trip. That year, our destination was New York City. We were looking forward to the city, the shows and the culture of the much larger town. And while we were there, fortune shined her face upon me, or so I thought. Walking down a random street in New York City and, lo and behold, what do I happen to find on the wrist of a street vendor but none other than that highly sought-after Gucci watch. How great is that, right? Now, part of me at the time felt bad for whoever's truck this particular watch had fallen off of. After all, since it was being sold for a paltry \$50, I knew that it had to be "hot." But I wasn't going to let a little unethically keep me from the score of all scores. I haggled with the guy a bit, my dad taught me to do that so I thought I did him proud. Purchased that \$500 watch for just \$40. It was the steal of the century, right? Not so much. That cheap knockoff watch didn't even last the remainder of our trip to New York City before conking out. Now look, it was fairly obvious pretty quickly that I hadn't scored the deal of a lifetime but, rather, was just another small-town rube getting taken in the Big Apple. Counterfeits stink, that's what I learned. Thankfully, I wasn't the biggest sucker of the trip. One of my classmates thought they were getting a fantastic deal on a stolen VCR. When they got it back to the hotel and opened the box what was inside was, no kidding, just an appropriately sized rock. Both that guy and I can attest to this day, that unless you're sure you're getting the genuine article, stay away.

We've probably all gotten taken at some point in our lives. It just seems to be the nature of living on this side of eternity that everyone becomes a con man's prey at some point no matter how savvy you think you are. And we all know the bad feelings when the counterfeit products let us down.

But what about the Gospel? Are there counterfeit versions of it out there in the world? ABSOLUTELY! In fact, do a Google search on it and you'll see just how many false Gospels people think are out there.

And while it was pretty annoying to have gotten fleeced up there in New York City, I recovered from my loss relatively quickly. False watches can only do so much damage to you, even if your friends remember the incident years after the fact. False gospels, on the other hand, can exact a far worse toll. They can dampen your faith life and make what should be a vibrant experience of life into something far less enjoyable.

So, our goal today is to talk about the Gospel. The real one and its false variants. The aim of course is to make sure that we're following the Lord as best as we're able.

So, what is the Gospel? I rather like this definition of it from John Piper – "The gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for our sins and rose again, eternally triumphant over his enemies, so that there is now no condemnation for those who believe, but only everlasting joy. That's the gospel."

A few things need to be noted about this true Gospel to being with. To begin with, the Gospel is only really good news FOR SINNERS. Yep, this good news is reserved only for the sinners among us. The Gospel is the Good News of what God the Father has done through the Son Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit to save sinners. Through Jesus Christ, God has rescued sinful humanity from the snare of sin and the punishment of death by the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the Cross.

The Scriptures go on to tell us that this Gospel is received BY FAITH and by Faith alone, which is itself the gift of God. That's in Ephesians 2, by the way. That's the Gospel.

Notice what's not such a bit part of it. You. Now, on the one sense, you are the recipient. You receive the Gospel like a gift. But the work, the activity, the juice? That's all God. Only the thing is, there are a lot of things out there that sound like, or even are reported to be the Gospel, but are NOT. On top of that, this world offers us a host of things, philosophies and beliefs that are all assumed to be equal with the Gospel. But these, too, are false paths which can lead to dark outcomes. This awareness becomes more complicated when you realize that various denominations are frequently promoting one of more different versions of these False Gospels. It's the reason that I think it's so important that you have a base-line knowledge of the Word. Otherwise, how will you ever know?

Now look, there isn't a verse in the Bible that precisely defines what the Gospel is. But I assure you, the more and more you read the Bible, the more clearly it emerges. But make no mistake about it, there are false variants of the true Gospel out there.

The first of our False Gospels is what one author I read this week calls the “Faith AND” Gospel which I think is a pretty good way to describe it. Make no mistake about it, it’s the false Gospel that’s front and center here in Galatians because it’s the same one the Judaizers believed in.

Remember last week we talked about these Judaizers. They believed that baptism was ONLY an entry point for believers. After being Baptized, it was assumed that Gentile believers should willingly adopt the Jewish laws as a means of showing their conversion. That’s why this author calls this false Gospel the faith AND Gospel. Faith, despite the many Scriptural attestations showing us otherwise, is deemed insufficient by proponents of this gospel. There simply **MUST BE WORKS ALSO**.

Now look, let’s be honest. This one makes a lot of sense to us, doesn’t it? After all, we’ve all grown up in a meritocracy. It foundationally makes sense to us that you earn your keep, even with God. It is just a natural assumption that you’ve got to somehow earn your own way. There’s no such thing as a free lunch, right? And while this false gospel may make a lot of sense to us logically, it is actually countered here in Galatians and in other places.

One of the first things we’ve got to wrap our heads around is that justification isn’t a process, it’s a completed action of God. What that means is that you’re not more justified today in God’s eyesight because you came to church, rather your justification occurred when Christ was crucified on the Cross. That’s an action that took place in the past but still has ongoing effects. You were justified, once-and-for-all, at Calvary. While you can grow in Christ, that’s sanctification, you are never more saved or less saved on a day-to-day basis depending on your actions. You **ARE ALREADY SAVED** not through any action of your own but rather through what Jesus Christ did for us on the Cross.

Believe me, there’s lots of ways that this false gospel masquerades as the real thing. Take for example the Roman Catholic belief in the necessity of doing penance for your sins. Now look, is it a good idea to make a constructive change after living with sin? Of course, it is. But your salvation doesn’t depend on it. Again, confession is indeed **GOOD** for the soul, there’s no doubt of that. Only if you’re doing it because you think it earns you favor with God, then you’ve got legalism, something that the Scriptures are assuredly against. This is the form of legalism that the Judaizers were pitching to people. They fell for it. Paul writes Galatians so that we don’t have to ever make the same mistake again.

But that’s just one type of false gospel. There are others. One that’s especially pernicious is the “Good Enough” Gospel. This gospel tells us that while nobody’s perfect, we happen to be good enough as it comes to our salvation. Again, this is a very easy to understand one if we don’t know our scriptures. For it is in Scripture that we are disabused of the idea that we’re good. Now look, this is going to fly in the face of a lot of us because we do imagine ourselves to be good people. And, well, compared to Hitler, I’m sure we come off smelling like roses. But sin isn’t a comparative thing. That is to say that we don’t get graded on a curve. Sin is abhorrent to God and even if we don’t admit it, we’re swallowed up by the stuff. Again, that doesn’t make us Hitler but to be Christian is to know in your heart of hearts that you’re not all wonderful. That there are parts of you, withered by sin. *“All have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God.”* That’s from Romans 3 and it’s as succinct a declaration about us all as you’re going to find in the Bible. The point being, we’re all bozos on the same bus. We’re sinners. Fallen short of the Glory of God. No, you’re not good enough to get into heaven. Neither am I. No one is, if we’re to take the Bible seriously and for that reason, we can exclude this as being the Gospel for there is simply no good news to be found to be left in sin and doomed to eternal death.

The problem with the “Good Enough” Gospel is that it leaves us oblivious to our own shortcomings. It doesn’t ask us to improve or to grow, it simply tells us, uncritically, that we’re “good enough” without cause, rhyme or reason. And the long and short of it is that this false Gospel is fundamentally eaten up with pride. After all, what but pride tells you that your sin is somehow less of concern to God than someone else’s?

I think the false Gospel that hides in plain sight in our denomination is one an author I found calls, the **GOSPEL SO** heresy. It goes like this. Jesus Christ died on the Cross to relieve me of my sins. Because of that grace, I can do anything I like **NOW**, even those things actually proscribed by the Bible. I guess you could also call this the self-fulfillment gospel as sometimes it gets couched that way as well. Christ died to free me to do the very things he warns me not to in the first place. Now this kind of thinking has a theological name. It’s called antinominalism. Anti meaning against, nominalism, meaning law. The basic idea is that Jesus Christ has freed us from sin and death so that **NOW** we can do whatever we like.

Believe it or not, this heresy showed up pretty early in Christian thought. In fact, it must’ve deluded enough Christians that Paul directly takes aim against in in Romans. Paul directly counters this at the beginning of **Romans 6:1-4**. Hear now these words from the Apostle Paul: *“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? <sup>2</sup> By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? <sup>3</sup> Do you not know that*

*all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*” With these few verses alone, Paul destroys the Gospel so, false Gospel.

Because you see, the number one problem with this false Gospel is that it leaves us exactly where it finds us. As you read more about faith in the Bible, what you’ll see is that faith is dynamic. That is, faith is active. Not as the means of earning anything, rather gratitude for what God has done for you through the Holy Spirit emerges as good works. The problem with this false Gospel is that it leaves you thinking that you don’t need to change. You see, this false Gospel so is not good news because it leaves you in sin. The inbreaking of the Holy Spirit into our lives changes us, for the better. We don’t just keep doing what we’ve always done. Heaven forbid. No, what happens to us is called sanctification. Sanctification, unlike justification, is an ONGOING process. To walk the Christian life it to see you become more and more Christ-like. That is you’re more and more willing to lay down your own life to take up the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Which is a pretty good reason why another false Gospel the world pitches is probably not that good an idea, either. Out there circulating in the world of ideas about how to happily live life is that belief that what you really need to do is “be authentic” or “Follow your own lead” or whatever other slogan in out there to be self-realized. There are an awful lot of people out there operating under the faulty belief that if somehow that they could just fully and completely be “Themselves” whatever that is, that they’d be truly happy. I’ve heard this referred to as the “Self-Esteem Gospel” and it makes a lot of sense to me. You know, we grew up with all sorts of quote-unquote positive messages like “you are worthy.” Or “believe in yourself.”

The self-esteem Gospel looks at sin as being something incomplete people engage in. The cure, therefore, it to get people to think more highly of themselves. The problem is, while some sin does emerge from low self-esteem, most does not. In fact, most sin arises from the fact that we think too highly of ourselves and not because we think too lowly of ourselves. But think about that for a moment. It might be fine in a world all by yourself to be maximally you. But the thing is, you’re not on a planet all by yourself. There are others. And if everybody is striving to be authentically themselves, chances are there are going to be a whole lot of problems. Because you see, this thing about being natural born sinners. It means that, foundationally, apart from the Holy Spirit, we’re all dreadfully selfish. Now some are worse than others but, make no mistake about it, left to our own devices, we tend to be very self-absorbed. So this belief that just by being “authentically” you or whatever is somehow going to lead to happiness is a fool’s errand. Chances are if you fully walk down that path what you’ll find is that you’re lonely because nobody is much going to want to deal with someone who is so self-absorbed.

Now those are four false Gospels that are out there in the world. Each purpose is to deliver the same kinds of results as the real Gospel. But the fact of the matter is that none of them deliver the kind of strength and power that the real Gospel.

The Real Gospel locates us in the ever-present arms of a God who loves us. And we know all about that amazing love because of what Jesus Christ was able to accomplish. What the real Gospel teaches us is that in the fullness of time, God sent His only-begotten Son into the world. John 3:17 says that God did not send the Son into the World to condemn it but rather that by Him the world would be saved. In order to accomplish this, Jesus, a sinless man, took upon Himself a guilty verdict. He was stripped, beaten, mocked and crucified by the powers of this world. He hung upon a Roman Cross where He really died.

But God’s power would not be curtailed by anything. On the third day, Jesus arose from the dead. He ascended into heaven where He sits at the right hand of the Father. God’s power is greater than anything, even greater than sin and death. Both have been vanquished through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.