

Why study Galatians?

We are about to start a new sermon series in the book of Galatians and we may wonder why this particular book is particularly relevant right now? The short answer is that the book of Galatians is about the gospel and whatever our circumstances the gospel is always relevant. The slightly longer answer is in three parts:

1) The gospel is good news not good advice

The word gospel means good news, and good news is proclaimed or declared. We recently had a baby and once Jago was born we declared the news of his birth so that anyone who was interested (along with many people who weren't) could know our good news. At its most basic the Christian gospel is the declaration that Jesus is Lord. More fully, the gospel is the good news that God the Son left his throne in heaven to be born as a human, live a perfect life, and then die on a cross. On the cross Jesus swapped places with us, he took the punishment we deserved for our sin and gave us his righteousness. Three days later he rose again to prove it worked. The gospel is the declaration of this good news and to be a Christian we only need to believe it. So often however, we confuse good news with good advice. Perhaps because the gospel feels too good to be true, or because we feel the need to justify ourselves, or because we feel like we need to do something concrete and practical, we often try to add to the gospel. The irony is that by adding to the gospel we reduce the gospel from good news to good advice. After hearing the gospel we may ask "But what do I need to do?" "What ten steps do I need to follow?" "What practical tips can Christianity offer me that will improve my life?" Perhaps this issue is more acute because we live in a self-help culture, where we judge usefulness by its immediate relevance and practical application. If I can improve my life by stretching in the morning and detoxing my diet, what can Christianity offer me that I'm not getting already? But the gospel is not good advice to help me live a better life, it is good news about the perfect life that Jesus lived on my behalf. Studying Galatians is a necessary corrective to the temptation we all have to view the gospel, or indeed Christianity, as a form of sanctified self-help.

2) We don't need to make the gospel relevant: the gospel is relevant

Because the gospel is not good advice, which I can immediately apply to a particular situation it may not seem immediately relevant. For instance, we may ask "what does the gospel have to say about Covid-19?" But that is to make the assumption that my concerns are relevant and the gospel ought to respond to what I think is important. As human beings we often ask the Bible questions which reflect our agenda and priorities, when perhaps we ought to ask whether my priorities reflect the Bible's agenda? We are often tempted to let the concerns of our secular society decide what is relevant and force the gospel to make a response. But the gospel doesn't need to answer to anyone. The gospel is true and therefore enduringly relevant and so studying Galatians reminds us that the gospel does not respond to our agenda and concerns, we need to respond the gospel and its concerns.

3) We can never hear the gospel enough

In the end there is nothing I can do to be a good person. That is, there is nothing I can do to be righteous. Righteousness is a gift that is given to be by God. I cannot earn it, I don't deserve it; it is freely given by God to me. Most Christians would not dispute that. The question is, once I have received this free gift of righteousness what do I do then? Is the righteousness that comes from Jesus the first step of the Christian life, or is it the whole journey? It is tempting to think that I begin the Christian life by accepting Jesus but once I have done that there must be more to it. So, what do I need to do now that I am a Christian? And this is why the book of Galatians is important. The righteousness we receive from Jesus is not just the ABC of the Christian faith it is the A-Z of the Christian faith. We can never be reminded of this enough. **There is nothing we can do, that would cause God to love us any more or any less than he already does in Jesus. We don't need to do anything extra.** We don't need to stretch or eat vegetables, we don't need to speak in tongues or be subsequently baptised in the Spirit, **we just need to trust Jesus.** And we need to be reminded of this constantly because our hearts doubt that Jesus is enough, our sinful nature longs to justify itself apart from Jesus, and the pressures of the world tempt us to trust in anything other than Jesus. If we feel bored by hearing the same old gospel again, the chances are we haven't understand it—and that is why studying Galatians can help us!