

The Gospel - Uncomplicated

June 1, 2025

Welcome to the Beamsville Church of Christ Online Ministry. This week's message is titled, "The Gospel, Uncomplicated." Thank you to Ed, Heather, Dave, Dianne, and Paul for being part of the service. The scripture reading is Galatians 3, 26 to 29. Happy birthday this week to Aisha.

Scripture Reading

The reading of God's word today is Galatians 3, 26 to 29.

So in Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise.

Thank you, Lord, for your word.

Sermon

Good morning. Just a quick anecdote. I think I broke my child. It happens to all of us eventually, I suppose, but I shaved and he just, in the morning, just stares. Something fundamentally is wrong.

Also, for those like biblical studies, sometimes when you read texts, there's meanings that we may not get, extra meaning that the author may allude to or understand that we don't automatically get. This may or may not be true, but as I now know, there's a five-year rule with cancer, many cancers. If you go five years without reoccurrence, the chances of reoccurrence drops significantly. So that may or may not be true in this case. I'm nodding good. My anniversary is coming up sometime this fall, winterish, depending on how you count, which I don't know how you count. But anyway, just in case you may have heard five years and you may get more of a meaning there. And it's a good meaning. Anyway, let's turn to Galatians. But before we do that,

I'm going to start this morning in a very familiar and instantly universally understandable and with an easy grasp of our collective memories, the 70s, no, not 70, the 70s. I see nods of understanding and agreement.

The years around 70s in Europe were full of vast change, had a massive impact on the course of history, and at least for that part of the world and those that were later influenced by it. Despite my declaration at the beginning, I don't expect that we all have a grade 10 level understanding of this history here. But do you recognize the name Charlemagne? Heard that name before. In French, it's French, translated English, Charles the Great. Charlemagne by 790 has done several things that were basically impossible at the time. He, with the help of his father and grandfather, had united the various peoples of France, what started out in that era as Gaul, then turned to Francia, and now what we know as France. But we're not gonna talk about that.

He became the first ruler or emperor over not just Francia but also Northern Italy, what is now Germany, and lots of other places in that general area, arguably the first emperor in that sense since the Roman Empire. But we're not gonna talk about that. He used situation of the day to change the focus and attention of the Pope, and thus, the centralized Catholic Church from eastward looking, from Constantinople to westward looking, again shifting the focus for many aspects of the ways that were all the way back to the Roman Empire, to the more western European focus, at least for the people in that region. But we're not gonna talk about that.

And finally, Charlemagne's conquest and reign develop and become the foundation of what becomes modern France, the creation of the Holy Roman Empire, which by the way is not located in any part of the original Roman Empire, fun, and eventually, which eventually becomes Prussia, which eventually becomes modern Germany. In a

lot of ways, Charlemagne sets the course of much of the formation of western Europe, but we're not gonna talk about that.

Instead, I want to talk about a clergyman, teacher, later scholar, advisor, and reformer born in and around 735 England, Northumbria, York. Alcuin, sometimes called Ealhwine, Alhwin, Alchoin, take your pick, was a student of the Archbishop of York and skilled with diplomacy and people skills and practical theology. At some point, we don't know when, he was sent by the Archbishop of York to Rome, to the Pope to get the Archbishop promoted to Cardinal, which Alcuin successfully does because he's good at that sort of thing. On his way back, as he travels back from Rome to England, he runs into Charlemagne. Charlemagne is by now conquering various parts of what we now consider Germany. Charlemagne, despite being quite ruthless and pretty conquering-like, was very devout in the same way that his father and grandfather was. And while it may seem at odds now, the norm then was conquering your neighbors and forcing them to convert, or just eliminating them entirely, was in fact seen and understood as being very devout.

So Charlemagne really likes Alcuin. His ability to talk, to be very knowledgeable about theology in a practical sense is very appealing to an emperor who has willfully or unwillfully designated himself as being on a conquering mission from God. Alcuin then is invited to join Charlemagne's court. He teaches the emperor personally, his family, even becomes private tutor to his children in all matters, but especially religion. He is eventually appointed by Charlemagne to the very high position in the religious estate at the time as abbot of Marmoutier Abbey in Tours.

In many ways, his life is fascinating and transformative. Alcuin's journey and the doings in the court are significant, but we're not gonna talk about that. Instead, we're gonna highlight something else, something dangerous, surprising that Alcuin does and starts. But first, another look at history, because we haven't had enough of that already, the state of Christianity in France, Francia at the time.

Christianity, or at least the Catholic Church, was brought to Western Europe by the Romans much earlier. After the Romans left, the uniformity of the church was lost and fracturing happened. In France or Francia, while not explicitly, they broke from the Pope and the centralized structure of the church, they created their own centered version of it. They didn't necessarily follow the decrees from Rome and they had their own saints, their own practices, some of their own local beliefs. Whereas in England at the time, which is somewhat ironic given what happens later, they were much more faithful to Rome, much more knowledgeable about the faith, scripture, traditions, et cetera. In France, the church was more of a lifestyle. General cultural makeup tied more to local identity as a people than to faith or those practices of faith, which is of course very interesting, but we're not gonna talk about that.

This is how Alcuin is such a fresh breath of air to the emperor who is devout and very interested in the religious health of his people. He brings a new perspective, a new focus that he wasn't getting at home. We have letters between them and one in particular which Alcuin points out to the emperor that despite this being the very unpopular opinion, he challenges Charlemagne's policy of forced conversions of conquered people, i.e. if you don't convert to Christianity when we conquer you, we eliminate you. This was at the time a personal edict of the emperor. And here Alcuin says, no, that's not the faith we believe in. We shouldn't be doing this. Charlemagne actually does change his policy, not to anything we would consider humane, but he does nevertheless change.

While at the abbey and tours, Alcuin notices that the people that he is serving and the people he's working with, the religious leaders have very little actual knowledge of their faith. So he takes on the entire religious structure and basically invents the entire concept of modern religious education, at least in Europe, which is also very interesting. But we're not gonna talk about that.

At the time, the Bible was not generally one book, but rather a collection of books. People would have local collections of these books of the Bible, those books of the Bible, these other editions, those other editions. Alcuin was the first to uniformly put this into one volume altogether, for the purpose of ease of understanding and use. The magnitude of this is comparable to perhaps modern day Wikipedia, in the good sense, not in the bad sense.

There was a single place that you could go to and look for answers. As before, you had to have a whole library or access to a library. He invented or developed punctuation so that people could better and more easily read the Bible. It is much easier to read and understand with periods and sentences, question marks, signal that this was a question, even the use of capital letters in some cases. If you look at old manuscripts, especially of the original Greek, it's just a chain of letters, no spacing, no capitalization, no, just, and it's up to the reader to interpret and put through. It's later where we get the punctuation that we would understand today set in structure, albeit in different languages, that we understand today. He also, while still being faithful to Rome and to all the things that are associated with it, simplified a lot of things. He removed extra requirements that may have developed locally, structures and practices that were extra or actually, according to him, against his understanding of faith.

In fact, the end of his life, he was working on changing the very style of letters themselves, we might call it font, so that people could read the Bible more easily. Initially at that time, originally at that time, the letters on the page were more like calligraphy, flowery and big and ornate, and he was advocating and developing a style that more modern, what we would understand today, simple, simplistic, clean, readable. This would eventually become the script that was later used in the Vulgate, the Bible that was specifically designed for the common person.

So you're probably sitting there saying to yourself, "Paul, why did we spend all the time on that?" Good question. First, you had to, and I'm a history nerd, so sorry. But second, and perhaps more importantly, I wanna highlight that it is possible, even in a time of great change, opposing cultural and religious tides, that a few people can make an uncomplicating reform towards a simple understanding and practice of faith. That is arguably world changing. We likely didn't know his name before today, although perhaps after today, you will never be able to forget Alcuin's name, sorry. But he has shaped much towards common understanding and usage of our religious world. My point today is that we can and should have much the same mission as Alcuin. The gospel is uncomplicated, its application does not need to be complicated, at least in the first instance. A good example of that is what Dave shared with us there at the table.

For this purposes, for this purpose, let's look at Galatians. The Apostle Paul is making the same point in this book. Galatians 4, 8 through 9. "Formally, when you did not know God, "you were slaves to those who were by nature not gods. "But now that you know God, or rather known by God, "this is how you, this is that, "how is it that you are turning back "to those weak and miserable forces? "Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?" The Apostle Paul is worried that the Galatians are turning away from the gospel to forces that are weak and miserable and that the result would be slavery. And we get a hint here of what that was in that they were once already enslaved by these forces. A very quick look at the broad argument of Galatians. I will only make very brief comment.

Chapter one, six through nine, I'm astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ who, and are turning to a different gospel, which is really no gospel at all. Evidently, some are throwing you into confusion or trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preach to you, let them be under God's curse. For we have already said, so now say it again, if anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than the one you have accepted, let them be under God's curse. The Galatians are being confused. The gospel is being perverted. Others have been actively promoting this. Note the comment that the Apostle Paul says at the beginning, the correct gospel is the one where they were called to live in the grace of Christ.

Chapter two, 11 and 13, when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy so that by their hypocrisy, even Barabbas [sic] was led astray.

Verse 14 through 16, when I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, you are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How was it then that you forced Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? We who are by Jews by birth are not sinful Gentiles. Know that the person who

is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we too have put our faith in Christ that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because the works of the law, no one will be justified.

This is an example of the Apostle Paul of what he's talking about in the different gospel that the Galatians are being taught. It has to do with them being told that Christianity is actually Christianity plus Jewish faith. It has to do with them accepting the faith of Christianity, but also the practices, historic and otherwise, of the Jewish faith. Food restrictions, holy days, et cetera. This is why the Galatians were once under this slavery before, as the Apostle Paul puts it, as many of them before coming Christians were Jewish by ethnicity before, or had become practicing people of the Jewish faith. Maybe they were Gentiles, not Jewish, but they had willfully taken on the Jewish faith before.

Chapter three, seven and nine through nine, understand then that those who have faith were children of Abraham. Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham. All nations were blessed through you, so these who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. The Apostle Paul says that the gospel, even since before the Jewish faith, that these Judaizers are pointing to, is meant to be simple, justified by faith, not the following practices or traditions that would come in the intervening period.

Chapter three, starting at verse 23 through 25, before the coming of this faith, we are held in custody under the law, locked up until faith that would come to be revealed. So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. The Apostle Paul does say that these former practices and faith system was not always wrong. There was a time when it was needed, but that time is no more. Christ has come and we are now justified by faith, no more justification by any of these practices.

Chapter five, verse one, for it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then, do not let anyone, do not let yourselves be burdened again by the yoke of slavery. Verse 13, you, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. Do not use your freedom to indulge in flesh, rather to serve one another humbly in love, for this entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command. Love your neighbor as yourself. If you bite and devour each other, watch out, or you will be destroyed by each other.

And then finally, 26, do not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. The Apostle Paul calls for the Galatians to be free from these extra requirements and this changing of the gospel, to be free. The gospel is uncomplicated. All you need is faith in Christ, and honest faith and attempting to follow Christ is all that is required in Christianity. In the context of the Galatians, no adding of former practices, no matter how right they may have been before, is necessary and in fact, is now a different gospel entirely.

In our context, we're always being asked to convert to a different gospel. This is not new. In fact, we saw some of that in the 17, no, 700s. This is not new and I will not trace this throughout history, but sufficient to say that one constant in our timeline is the threats to our faith, is people, culture, society trying to change our faith into something else. One of the main ways this occurs in, like the Galatians, is complicating it. This can be done through good faith, people honestly thinking they're serving God by doing it. There are always more finer points to explore of this part of faith, of this doctrine, of this scripture, et cetera, correctly or wrongly, and this can become seemingly very important and even lead to massive consequences. The church splits even go back in history, wars. In a humorous way, the very serious question that is posed, how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? It's very important to answer that.

But complicating faith can also be done in bad faith, or at least lead to bad faith outcomes. It is always easier to control a population if a system is complicated and mystifying, or of twisting some aspect of faith to further a political goal, no matter how good or bad. And if you as a leader can say, my policy to do blank, whether good or bad, is based on God, well then, who can argue with you about that? Shuts down all opposition. To argue against it means to actually challenge faith, which that's a different thing than just challenging the political leader.

I think we exist in a time now, well, I think we in such a time is now, while imperfect, our collective faith has been under renewed threat of people complicating, perverting, and trying to convert us into different gospels entirely. This is not new, as I said earlier, but it does seem to be more targeted and more people of faith has succumbed to it. Notice that I have not named specific causes, people or movements in this matter. Don't wanna get into that. But it applies across a wide range of positions, some which seemingly, again, come out of a genuine good faith place, and some from a definite bad faith place. Regardless of the source, there is a time and a place to do that analysis. I would argue that today is not that time and place in a sermon, but rather, perhaps in a sermon, we can talk about our response to it. I believe the same response that is given to the Galatians applies to us too. The Apostle Paul, as the Apostle Paul did for Galatians, we must remind ourselves of the uncomplicated truth of the gospel.

Galatians 3, 28 is a good example of a scripture that clearly gives us an uncomplicated truth of the gospel that leaves little room for others to complicate things. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, nor is there male or female, you are all one in Christ Jesus. Our faith is not based nor founded on any person other than Christ, no culture, value system, political belief, et cetera, but rather Christ alone as revealed through scripture and interpreted and understood through the community of believers as led by the spirit.

It is striking the majority of the Apostle Paul's letters in the New Testament, where he spends a lot of time reminding his readers of who they are and then says, now go do this. Roughly, if you look at all of his letters, the first half is just reminding his readers who they are, where they came from, what position they now are in in Christ. And the second half is usually, okay, do this based on that.

In the same way, we can first remember the gospel of freedom in Christ to which we were originally called and then move to action. What action? In the general sense, I think the application in Galatians also applies, of course, more specifically, and situationally it might apply different too, but as a starting point, these will always be true, so it's good to focus on ways. These are good applications that we can apply. In these times when our faith is challenged, being complicated, being perverted, or at least threatening to be so, live by the spirit in accordance with the spirit.

Chapter 5, 13 through 15, you, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. Do not use your freedom to indulge in the flesh, but rather serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping with this one command, love your neighbor as yourself. If you bite and devour each other, watch out, or you too, or you will be destroyed by each other. We are free in faith. Use that freedom to serve each other humbly in love, not in sin. Love each other, don't destroy each other.

Later in the same chapter, verse 16, so I say walk by the spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the spirit and the spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with one another so that you are not to do whatever you want, but if you are led by the spirit, you are not under the law. The acts of the flesh are obvious, sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy, drunkenness and orgies and the like. I warn you as I did before that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the spirit is, all together, love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. See, we learned something. Against such things there are no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh and with its passions and desires. Since we live by spirit, let us keep in step with the spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking, and envying each other.

These texts describe the negative and positive aspects of the application. In verses 13 through 15, notice that the list of bad things to avoid are all relational. They hurt people. And notice the list of good things to do, verses 22 and 23, are also relational, but they help people, they lift each other up. The final line in verse 26 is instructive. We should not provoke each other. It is very easy for us to feel superior to those who may not agree with us. I mean, we believe in the truth. We have superior knowledge and faith, but that is a trap. Even as people may accuse us of inferior belief, we must respond not with some fake pretending that everything is okay or that their position is fine,

but we don't envy, we don't provoke. Our job isn't to go on the offensive, to prove to the world that we or God is right, but rather instead to know firmly who we are in Christ and to act in the same manner.

To remind ourselves of the freedom in Christ, faith in Christ alone, and then to act in love towards each other and to those around us. Specifically avoiding doing things that hurt others and provoke others, but rather doing things that help each other and lift each other up. Like Alcuin in 790, in Charlemagne's empire, we can impact the world in ways that may seem insignificant at the time. Think about what he did. He did not set out to change the religious landscape of the day. All he wanted to do was make the Bible more readable and understandable and remove unnecessary obstacles in people's path towards faith. And to call people to what he understood to be a more uncomplicated truth of faith.

May we in our ways and our own contexts, using the knowledge of who we are in Christ and in the principles of love towards each other and to those around us in acts and in words, promote a simple faith in Christ, a true faith in Christ.

What might a world look like if in some hypothetical thousand years time, thousand and 300ish or so, 200ish and so, in a sermon somewhere on Titan or something, I don't know. And a group of people are looking back at now. A historian, a preacher, whomever, whatever the word is, is looking back now. What would they say? Well, they look at this time and say just maybe that there was another Alcuin or group of Alcuins that had a dramatic effect on our religious landscape towards an uncomplicated faith, a true faith that had resonating impact to today.

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