

Galatians, Part 1

No other gospel

BIG IDEA The gospel comes from God and declares sinners right with him through faith in Jesus Christ - not through works of the law or added requirements.

Purpose and outcome

By the end of the lesson, the class should be able to:

- state the crisis in Galatia and explain why adding requirements to Christ changes the gospel;
- trace Paul's defense of the gospel's divine source and the church's recognition of God's grace in his mission;
- define justification and explain why works of the law cannot establish a right verdict before God;
- connect justification by faith with Jew-Gentile fellowship at one table; and
- identify modern ways churches can turn the fruit of grace into unofficial entrance requirements.

Lesson at a glance

TIME	MOVEMENT	AIM
0-3	Welcome and prayer	Ask the Spirit to guide the class into the truth of the gospel.
3-7	Recap and orient	From Paul's mission to the crisis threatening his churches.
7-16	No other gospel	Gal. 1:1-10: Christ is not necessary-plus-something-else.
16-25	Revealed, not invented	Gal. 1:11-24: God called Paul and revealed his Son.
25-34	Recognized, not revised	Gal. 2:1-10; Acts 15: grace recognized across the church.
34-42	One gospel, one table	Gal. 2:11-21: justification by faith reshapes fellowship.
42-47	The Gospel Then and Now	Test unofficial additions to grace and Christian belonging.
47-50	Synthesis and prayer	Restate the gospel; assign Galatians 3-6.

Before class

BOARD QUESTION What happens to the gospel when someone says, 'Christ is necessary - but not enough'?

Have participants use their own Bible or Bible app. Read Galatians 1:6-10 and 2:11-21 aloud. Summarize or select verses from 1:11-2:10 and Acts 15 so the lesson remains within 50 minutes.

1. CORE - A crisis worthy of astonishment

Read Galatians 1:6-10. Paul omits his customary thanksgiving and moves directly from greeting to astonishment. Some teachers were pressuring Gentile believers to accept circumcision and Torah observance as necessary for full membership among God's people.

- The problem is not that circumcision, Jewish heritage, or obedience are inherently evil. The problem is making them necessary additions to Christ for justification and belonging.
- Paul describes turning to a different gospel as deserting the God who called them by grace. A distorted gospel misrepresents both God's action and Christ's sufficiency.
- Paul's curse in 1:8-9 guards the message, not his ego. Even Paul or an angel would be condemned for preaching a contrary gospel.

TEACHING LINE A gospel that says 'Christ plus this requirement' is not a stronger gospel. It says Christ is not enough.

LOOK CLOSER Paul first calls the message a 'different gospel' and then immediately says it is 'really no gospel at all.' The force is rhetorical: there are not several valid gospels competing for market share.

2. CORE - The gospel was revealed, not invented

Use Galatians 1:11-24, especially verses 11-12 and 15-24. Paul's gospel did not originate as a human attempt to please an audience. The risen Christ revealed himself and commissioned Paul. His former persecution and later proclamation display God's initiative.

- Paul's testimony supports the gospel of grace: the persecutor did not earn his commission; God called him by grace.
- Paul's independence protects the gospel from the charge that he invented a Gentile-friendly version or merely copied Jerusalem leaders.
- His independence is not isolation. Paul later meets Peter and James, and the Judean churches glorify God because of his changed life.

READING GUARDRAIL Galatians says Paul's gospel and commission came through Christ. It does not mean Paul never learned historical details or Christian tradition from other believers.

3. CORE - The gospel was recognized, not revised

Summarize Galatians 2:1-10. False believers attempted to make Titus, a Gentile Christian, receive circumcision. Paul refused because 'the truth of the gospel' and Gentile freedom were at stake. The Jerusalem leaders added nothing to Paul's message, recognized God's grace, and extended fellowship.

- Paul did not go to Jerusalem to have humans authorize a gospel he had invented.
- The recognized leaders nevertheless tested the situation and affirmed that the same God was working through Peter among Jews and Paul among Gentiles.
- Unity did not require identical ministries; it required one gospel and mutual recognition of grace.

Use Acts 15:1-11 and 19-21 as the church-wide version of the controversy: Must Gentile believers be circumcised and keep the law of Moses to be saved? Peter answers that Jews and Gentiles are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus. James refuses to place that yoke upon Gentile believers while giving pastoral instructions for shared fellowship.

4. CORE - The truth of the gospel at one table

Read Galatians 2:11-21. Peter had eaten with Gentile Christians, but withdrew when men associated with James arrived. His conduct pressured other Jewish believers, including Barnabas, to separate.

- Peter's words may still have been orthodox, but his table behavior communicated that Gentile believers were not fully acceptable without adopting Jewish identity markers.
- Paul confronts Peter publicly because a public action was distorting the gospel and harming the church.
- Justification is God's declaration that sinners are right with him. It comes through faith in Christ, not works of the law.
- Galatians 2:20 moves from verdict to union with Christ: the believer's life is now shaped by the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us.
- To rebuild law-keeping as the ground of righteousness would set aside grace and imply that Christ died for nothing.

TEACHING LINE Peter's choice of lunch companions preached a message. Christian conduct can deny in practice the gospel we confess with our mouths.

The Gospel Then and Now

CHURCH REALITY THEN Gentile believers were pressured to add circumcision and Torah identity markers to faith in Christ before being treated as full members of God's family.

CHURCH TEMPTATION NOW Churches can turn theology, moral reform, political identity, cultural style, family background, or denominational tradition into unofficial entrance requirements.

GOSPEL-SHAPED CHURCH Because God justifies through faith in Christ, the church guards the gospel, receives those Christ receives, and teaches obedience as the fruit of grace rather than the price of belonging.

Discussion

1. Why does Paul treat this disagreement as a gospel issue rather than a harmless difference in practice?
2. How do Galatians 1-2 hold together revelation from Christ and accountability within the wider church?
3. What doctrine did Peter's table withdrawal communicate, whether he intended it or not?
4. What good Christian practices are most likely to become unofficial entrance requirements today?
5. How can a church distinguish the fruit of grace from an addition to grace?

Scholarly notes and guardrails

- Date and destination - The working view is an early letter to the South Galatian churches planted in Acts 13-14, written before the Jerusalem Council. A common alternative dates Galatians around or after the council and may locate the recipients in North Galatia. The lesson's gospel argument does not depend on resolving every detail.
- Galatians 2 and Acts - On the working chronology, Galatians 2:1-10 most likely reflects the famine visit of Acts 11, while Acts 15 addresses the controversy later and publicly. Others identify Galatians 2 with Acts 15. State the options in no more than three minutes.
- Works of the law - Circumcision and food practices are central identity markers in this controversy, but Paul's claim reaches farther: no human obedience establishes a right verdict before God. Obedience follows justification; it does not purchase or complete it.
- Faith in Christ - Some scholars translate the phrase as the 'faithfulness of Christ.' The ordinary NIV reading, faith in Christ, fits the immediate argument. Either way, salvation rests on Christ and excludes boasting in human achievement. This is safe to omit.
- Peter and James - Paul does not say James instructed Peter to withdraw. He says certain men came 'from James.' Do not make James responsible for a command the text does not record.

LIKELY RABBIT TRAILS Do not let circumcision anatomy, North/South Galatia, the exact Jerusalem visit, or modern labels for Paul's opponents take over the class. Identify the textual stakes and return to the sufficiency of Christ.

Leader preparation

Commentaries consulted: Scot McKnight, Galatians (NIV Application Commentary), Galatians 1-2; John Stott, The Message of Galatians, Galatians 1-2; Timothy George, Galatians (New American Commentary), Galatians 1-2; Ajith Fernando, Acts (NIV Application Commentary), Acts 15; John B. Polhill, Acts (New American Commentary), Acts 15; Life Application Bible Commentary on Galatians and Acts.

ECO connection: Essential Tenets I (God's Word: The Authority for Our Confession) and III.A (God's grace in Christ). Official text: <https://eco-pres.org/constitution/>

Before Lesson 5: Read Galatians 3-6. Mark references to promise, law, faith, Spirit, flesh, freedom, and love. Ask how grace produces obedience without returning believers to slavery.