

# Counterfeit Gospels

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## Scripture Reading

*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. (Galatians 1:6-9 ESV)*

## **THE PROBLEM WITH IDOLATRY**

[Show image of two \$10 bills] Can you spot the forgery? In 2015, there was around \$147 million in fake U. S. currency changing hands all over the world. In the year prior, the Secret service shut down nearly 200 counterfeit manufacturing plants around the globe, and arrested over 2,000 forgers.<sup>1</sup> (The answer is: the bottom one is fake).

[Show image of two \$100 bills] Can you spot the forgery here? According to the Department of the Treasury, we have upped our game and the number of fake bills has been cut in half. The latest figures say there is only \$70 million in counterfeit bills out there.<sup>2</sup> But spotting the difference can be quite hard. (The answer is: the top one is fake).

It's not always that hard. Consider some of these items. “Specialman” rather than “Superman.” “Pizza Hit.” “Game child.” “Dolce & Banana.” The list goes on and on.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Wells, “Can you find the forgery?” *CNBC* (3 Sep 2015).

<https://www.cnbc.com/2015/09/02/can-you-find-the-forgery.html>

<sup>2</sup> Bradley Ruhmann, “Funny Money no laughing matter” (March 12, 2021).

<https://www.wauchulastatebank.com/blog/funny-money-no-laughing-matter>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.awesomeinventions.com/bad-counterfeit-products-made-in-china/;](https://www.awesomeinventions.com/bad-counterfeit-products-made-in-china/)

<https://www.boredpanda.com/funny-brand-imitations-knock-offs-china/>

Sometimes counterfeits look just like the real thing and we are fooled by it. Other times, we want something else so bad that we pretend it's the real thing, even when it doesn't even look like the real thing. In those cases, we fool ourselves.

In the Old Testament, people had counterfeit gods. And they were silly! Sometimes, they would carve their own god out of wood, or chisel it out of stone. The prophets talk about the deaf, mute, lifeless idols made with human hands. How silly to think of that as a substitute for the almighty creator God! I mean, how could anyone fall for them?

And then we read that God's own people—even while Moses was on the mountain getting the commandments from God—were making a golden idol to worship. God's finger was still powdery from etching the commandments when the children of Israel broke the very first one! But that was the Old Testament. We're not so silly now, right?

Isn't it interesting that the New Testament warns Christians to stay away from idolatry (1 Cor 10:14; 1 John 5:21; Rev. 21:8; 22:15)? Well, we might say, carving images might have still been a thing in the first century, but surely that doesn't apply to me. I can't help but notice that when the New Testament makes lists of things Christians should be careful to avoid, everything else in the list sounds like something that is a real temptation now! There are sins of the heart like hatred, discord, rage, selfishness, greed, lust, and envy. There are sins of the tongue like slander. There are sins of the body like stealing, swindling, carousing, getting drunk, and sexual immorality. Which of those is not a constant problem in our culture...or in every culture? And in all three passages, he adds to the list “idolatry,” even adding in 1 Peter “detestable idolatry” (which is stunning given the other things in the list (1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Gal 5:19-21; 1 Pet 4:3)!

Why is idolatry the only item on the list we think no longer exists? You know the answer. It does exist. And it is real problem and temptation...for Christians.

You see, idols aren't just statues in our houses. *An idol is anything that takes the place in our lives to do or be for us what only God can do or be for us.* Your safety. Your security. Your anchor. Your go-to in difficult moments. Your ultimate allegiance. Your greatest love. (see Eph 5:5; Col 3:5; Rom 2:2). And a *gospel* is the announcement of good news you think your god supplies.

Our world is full of false gospels which represent the counterfeit gods of money, sex, and power. Turn on the television. Step outside. And you'll see these competing gospels. “Whoever dies with the most toys, wins.” “Happiness is found in pursuing pleasure.” “Might makes right.”

These are gospels without Jesus. And they do not deliver.

Take this gospel for example: “the answer to all my troubles will be found in more money and more things.” Either for our own benefit (to feel better and live the good life) or for other’s benefit (think of all the good I can do if I make this my goal of life: to make as much as possible). Money and materialism are not the answer to how this mess is going to be made right. It became gospel for many in the 80’s era where “greed is good” was the mantra. But what was the result? Studies continue to show that, per capita, those with the most money are the most stingy. Having more things causes us to build walls to protect and separate ourselves from others, rather than making friends and opening ourselves to others. And just look at the celebrities with all the money who clearly haven’t figured out how to live a joy-filled life. Scripture calls Mammon a “god.” It’s a counterfeit god! It’s an idol. It’s deceiving. And if this is your gospel, what flows from it? Greed, envy, jealousy, stealing, and murder. No, money and materialism promises far more than it can deliver. You won’t find grace or truth without Christ. And as a gospel, it delivers only death.

How about this gospel: “the answer to all my troubles will be found in the most pleasure I can find in sex and drugs.” Sex and drugs are not the answer to how this mess is going to be made right. It became gospel for many in the Woodstock era. But what has been the result? One of the best books I’ve read this year is by Louise Perry. This atheist, liberal, feminist, takes on the view of sex that has become mainstream because of atheist, liberal philosophy. She says do you know what the sexual revolution has brought about? Disaster for women! If you want a portrait of what it produced, just take a look at Hugh Hefner and Marilyn Monroe. Or the Me Too movement. For men, it led to shallowness and abuse, treating women like numbers or pieces of meat. For women, it led to hollowness, mistreatment, and the lack of the thing we most want deep down: meaningful relationships based on trust. She says “this is a wickedly bad idea.” Sexual libertinism is the way of misery and hopelessness. Drugs the same way. I remember a picture in high school—of a drug addict, lying dead in the corner, every vein in his body had closed, so he found the only place left—and there he was, lying dead with the syringe sticking out of his tongue. This world promises far more than it can deliver. You won’t find grace or truth in those things. And as gospel, it delivers only death.

What about this gospel: “The answer to all our troubles is gaining control and using power and laws to force people to live right.” I see this gospel at work today, even among believers, (on the left and the right) who put all their effort into getting the right man elected, the right law passed or blocked, because that will save us. Power and control are not the answer to how this mess is going to be made right. We get caught up in thinking the answer is in government, leadership, laws, coercion, and

control. But just look at the books of Kings and Chronicles. You can fight all you want to put in power a good king; and it won't be two seconds before he's replaced with a bad king. And so on. And so on. And every time we try to make a list of what needs to be made right, it's always too short. And we spend our time on the issues we think matter most, only leading to a generation later who chastises us for failing to see the issues we didn't address. Plus, I've never known a coercive law to change a heart. And, except for those nations now standing, there is no nation in history that hasn't been conquered at some point. No. Power and control promises more than it can deliver. You won't find grace or truth in such pursuits. And as a gospel, it delivers only death.

I can think of lots of other gospels put in the place where only Jesus and the cross should be. Some find their happiness, meaning, and fulfillment in family, or group identity, or hard work, or self-discovery. None of them will yield the *shalom* peace we crave, or heal the rifts in our society, or offer everlasting hope.

A gospel without Jesus will not deliver us. It's the way of death.

### **ONLY ONE GOSPEL**

Any grand announcement that proclaims the hope of the world, the answer to salvation, the great deliverance from all our troubles—if the answer is not “Jesus Christ,” it is not true! This is why in the first chapter of Galatians, the Apostle Paul says there is no other gospel.

We all know that, right? I mean, that's obvious for any Christian, isn't it? Maybe. Or maybe not.

In every book Paul writes, he offers a greeting, then he says lots of good and positive things about the people he's writing to. Then he reminds them of the gospel. And finally, he tells them how to allow the gospel to shape their lives so they can be better.

But not here. Not in Galatians. He gives his greeting, but then where he usually says “I give thanks for you,” Paul says “I am astonished!”

Your Bible might say “I marvel” which means “I am shocked.” It's a word used for when people see a miracle, and Paul hardly ever uses it (2 Thess 1:10). He is genuinely shocked and bewildered by what has happened to the churches. He doesn't even have vocabulary for it. If you look over at 3:1, you'll see another new word in Paul's vocabulary for it. It's as if someone has “bewitched” or “cast a spell” over them. And

it’s happened “so soon.” He is saying to the Thessalonians, “I just saw you guys! What is going on here?!!”

They are “turning away” or “deserting.” The Greek word here means “to transfer your allegiance.” Paul calls them religious turncoats! Spiritual deserters! You can’t help but recall Exodus 32 where the first Israelites (like these first Christians) abandon the covenant almost before it has even been ratified...by building an idol for themselves.

And what are they turning away from? He doesn’t say “you are turning away from the Gospel.” He says “you are turning away from God!” This is why Paul is so astonished! The Christians are turning away from God! Paul is charging them with breaking the first commandment! It is impossible to forsake the gospel without forsaking God! Paul says “you are abandoning a relationship with God—because there can be no lasting relationship with God if it is not found in the cross of Jesus Christ!”

And He called you “in grace”! Paul is saying “when you didn’t deserve it; when you couldn’t earn it; God chose you out of his unmerited grace.” Everything having to do with salvation has to do with the grace of God (2 Cor 5:18). Turning away from the gospel is turning away from God, and it’s turning away from grace.

And what could possibly have been bewitching enough to take the place of God, of grace, of the gospel in their life? Paul says (literally in the Greek), “you’ve turn to another thing.” I can’t help but notice how Paul capitalizes on the pathetic nature of the move. They have left someONE behind in exchange for someTHING. That is worse than adultery! Imagine leaving your relationship with your spouse for a new car or something.

And what is this other thing they’ve left God and his grace for? Paul calls it “another gospel.” They have turned from the GOD who called them in GRACE to another announcement of saving hope and life-defining news. And what in the world could that be?

It doesn’t matter that much what that other “gospel” was. In this case, it turns out to be the addition of elements from Moses’ law (5:4). What really matters is what happens when you distort or change the gospel by taking from or adding to the finished work of Christ. Scot McKnight says that they have opted for “a system in which grace was not crucial and in which Christ’s work was not sufficient.” They thought that Moses’ law finishes out and fills in the gaps from what Christ has begun; that we must finish Christ’s unfinished work! Can you imagine moving from the grace of God—to that story?

Well, that story is nothing close to the gospel, so Paul says “that’s not even a gospel!” There is only one gospel! And it can’t be added to! But “some” are seeking to “trouble you.” Paul’s going right back to the wilderness and the Old Testament. For people who want to add Moses’ law to Jesus, they are acting like the bad guys in the OT, like Achar, who was called “the troubler of Israel” (1 Chr. 2:7).

And how are these false teachers troubling God’s people? They are turning the gospel of Christ into something else. Distorting the gospel. It’s a term of radical change—water-into-blood; daylight-into-dark kind of radical change. It means “to turn about or change completely.” And it has a sinister tinge to it. Some versions say “pervert”, but it could be translated “reverse!” John Chrysostom, a preacher in the 400’s, says even the slightest change to the gospel is to pervert the whole thing. You can’t modify the gospel without changing it! And if we are looking for some application, here it is: *troubling the church and changing the gospel are related*. The church lives by the gospel. The church’s greatest troublemakers are those from the inside who try to change the gospel. They trouble the church. You get the gospel wrong, and you don’t get God! It is not a coincidence that they were first *distorting* the gospel, and then, as Paul says, they were *deserting* the gospel.

And so Paul calls down some fiery anathema. In the Old Testament, to call something “accursed” is to call down the curse of God’s wrath on the darkest of evils that runs counter to the light of God (Deut 30:7). “If anyone (me, we, or even an angel) proclaims a gospel to you contrary to what you received, let them be accursed.” He doesn’t want struggling, sinful people to be lost; he is highlighting the devilish nature of false teaching, the harm it does, for they are doing harm to God himself! The glory of Christ and the good of men’s souls are at stake. Hear these words with the force of an earthquake or the sound of thunder. If we cared as much as Paul, we could not bear the corruption of the gospel.<sup>4</sup>

## TWO WAYS TO CORRUPT THE GOSPEL

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<sup>4</sup> John Piper said we need to “cultivate a pure and childlike imagination that hears a word like ‘anathema’ the way a child hears his first peal of thunder, or feels his first earthquake, or suffers his first storm at sea. The Bible does not reveal to us the eternal curse of God that we may yawn and turn the page. The wrath of God is revealed to shake unbelievers out of their stupor, and to take the swagger out of the Christian’s walk and the cocky twang out of his voice.”

John said “the law came through Moses; but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (Jn 1:17). There are two ways we can corrupt the gospel, and, in so doing, desert the God who called us in grace, and showed us the truth (John 1:14)

### **Gospel of Jesus Without The Cross**

The first way to corrupt the gospel of grace and truth through Jesus Christ, is by taking away from it. Replace truth by removing the cross. A gospel of Christ without a cross. Grace without truth.

We see this in any form of Christianity that wants Jesus to be our Savior, but not our Lord. Interestingly, this was the most common misunderstanding when Paul presented the gospel. “If you’re right, Paul,” said some who listened to him preach, “then it doesn’t matter how we live! After all, we are accepted because of what Jesus did, not what we do; so who cares what we do?! Because we are saved, we don’t have to live a good and holy life. God loves and accepts everyone just as they are. No demands. No expectations. No warnings. No obedience that follows.

Paul deals with this sharply; he calls it “lawlessness.” It gives the impression that God is some loving, impersonal force, we are basically good people with a little stain called “sin”, so God just snapped his fingers and said “all is forgiven. Go on with your lives.” That’s not true! We were swimming in our sin, the sin that caused a rift in the universe, and God is so Holy it was threatening his entire creation. And the price to fix the problem was costly: it cost the death of his own Son. And the cross is not only the thing that fixed the problem of sin in my life, it is the pattern of life for us who are being transformed by the Spirit to be what God always meant for us to be. I don’t know which way is up; but the cross shows me how to live. In chapter 2 of Galatians, Peter is accepting of Gentiles until his Jewish buddies come to visit, and then he reverts back to acting like the middle wall of partition was never removed, like the cross never happened. And Paul confronts him to the face. He doesn’t say “you know you are breaking a Christian rule—we aren’t supposed to be racist.” He says “you are not walking in line with the gospel!” This means the gospel is not just about how we get saved from something but for something. Just look at the beginning of Galatians chapter 1. Before he says he is astonished they are deserting God, he grounds what it means to belong to God. In verse 4, he says Christ “gave himself for our sins” (1:4). Let that sink deep into your heart. In 2:20, Paul says Christ “loved me and gave himself for me.” And one verse later, he says Christ didn’t “die for nothing” (2:21). He wants you to have the cross vividly displayed before your eyes at all times (3:1). “Never let the cross be removed from your eyes” says Paul. So how should it shape our lives? Just think about Philippians 2: “let this mind be in you, just as it was in Christ Jesus.” Let the selflessness of the cross shape your lives.

To put it another way: “what difference does it make” that Christ died? In the last two chapters of Galatians, Paul lists the kind of lifestyle that says “nothing ever happened.” And he warns Christians that people whose lives proclaim “I still live by my own gospel, the cross doesn’t shape my life at all, because I don’t really believe it” are people who haven’t received the gospel. That’s not the kingdom life we were saved for.

And, for Paul, the reason for such reckless lawlessness is two fold: for one, we don’t realize how bad we are when left to our own devices. The gospel says “I am sinful and flawed. More than I would have ever thought.” If that’s true, why would I live any way I wish? I don’t know which way is up! My wishes are often bad for me. I don’t want what is good for me. That’s one cause of lawlessness.

The second cause is a failure to appreciate the cross. You take your eyes off the cross, and you will want to know what’s in this for you; when is your pay day; when will I get mine; how can I win over this person; or how can we end up with a win-win situation; how can I conquer; what makes me better than my brother—you name the problem! We won’t find the answer! But when we cast our eyes on Christ bleeding from head to toe on that cross...our crucified God...that is where we find the gospel. The finished work. The incomparable, unmerited self-denying Savior. How can we make comparisons among ourselves after staring into the eyes of our crucified Lord? How can seek “one-ups-manship”? How can we continue to fight for our way? When we receive the gospel, and believe it more and more, the gospel creates a new changed life—one built on death and resurrection.

I like to talk about how obedience, good deeds and holiness relate to the gospel this way: We receive and believe the gospel (I was saved when I was nothing, so that by his power I could become something), and as we live our lives by the power of the Spirit, we believe it more and more deeply, and it shows in every part of our life.

But, the new changed life is not the gospel. The gospel creates a new changed life, but the changed life is not the gospel. And that brings us to the second way to corrupt the gospel.

### **Gospel of Jesus Plus Something**

The other way to corrupt the gospel of grace and truth through Jesus Christ, is to add to it. It’s a gospel of Jesus + something. Accept the truth. But replace the grace.



Paul says the Galatians were deserting God by turning their allegiance to another gospel: one that added some elements of the Mosaic law to the finished work of Christ on the cross.

I once heard a great line to explain how these Judaizing teachers were putting it: “Oh, I agree, Jesus is the door. But I am the screen door; so if God wants to accept Gentiles by faith, that’s great; but I’m going to need to see some ID—namely, proof of circumcision.”

It’s important to remember that circumcision was not a bad thing. It was a good thing. They were asking them to do what God’s people had been doing for generations—what had always been the sign of “people who belong to God.” It makes us all feel better if you would follow our traditions. Aunt Betty can’t worship well with you sitting next to her unless you do this.

And that’s the other side of the coin Paul addresses in Galatians 2. Before he tells Peter “you need to straighten up and walk in line with the gospel” he tells the people demanding Titus be circumcised before they will worship together with him “absolutely not! I won’t let you add something to the finished work of Christ on the cross.” He says “the gospel is at stake.” Paul says if you make people be circumcised in order to accept them as full status brothers in Christ, you have deserted God, the gospel, and grace. Why? Because adding to the finished work of the cross is saying “my right actions are what get me out of the mess I am in.” And that isn’t gospel. It’s so easy to slip into this way of thinking. “Oh, the gospel of grace? That’s what saves non-Christians. What saves Christians is right actions. Christians grow and are eventually saved by doing all the right things at the right times in the right ways (or asking forgiveness at the right times in the right ways). This is problem thinking because it assumes the gospel is: “good news: if you follow these rules, you’ll be marked as different; and then, when you are different, I’ll love and accept you as my own.”

Look at the story from the very beginning. God gave a law to Israel. He expected it to be followed. But he called them his people, and he delivered them from Egypt before he ever gave them a law. *They weren’t delivered because they kept the law; they kept the law because they had been delivered!* (Ex 19:4-5; Deut 7:6-9). Their law-keeping flowed out of their calling and their saving (God called and saved them from, and God called and saved them for). God actually says to his people that it’s possible for you to be keeping all of my rules, engaging in worship just the right way, and still be “uncircumcised in heart” (Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4). And Paul picks up on that in Philippians 3. He says “you know what? We—Christians, the people who trust in the Spirit, who boast in Christ—we are the “people of circumcision” (the people set apart and marked as the people of God) (Phil 3:3). And do know what serves as the basis of our confidence?

It’s not our excellent law-keeping. It’s not our record of obedience. That’s not how I know I’m safe. In fact, I’ve a got a record that will stack up against anyone’s record. But whatever it is, it’s worthless. My confidence is found in gaining Christ and being found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, but that which comes through faith in Christ.”

At the heart of the problem is a problem of the heart and a failure to understand the first commandment. No other gods. A God is what saves me. A god is where I find my identity. If we really believed “I don’t have what it takes. But I am more loved and accepted than I could ever have dreamed” it would shape a life of holy obedience. But *if holy obedience is what you think will earn you love and acceptance, you will quickly become a miserable neurotic who is either driven by fear that you’ve missed something, or pride that you never miss something!* But in that case, fear and pride become your gods. And you are to have no other gods before me.

Just look through the gospels. Story after story reads like the Pharisee and the tax collector. And in all of them, the less moral, less religious person goes home justified. The point of those stories is not to put down righteousness. It’s to empty us of self-righteousness. The answer to the problem “what will get me out of this mess? How will everything be made right” can’t be “just look at what I’ve done!” It has to be “Just look at what HE has done.”

And perhaps it’s time to ask a question that’s been nagging us the whole sermon long: *why did* Paul’s hearers misunderstand the gospel as lawlessness? I grew up hearing people use the word “gospel” all the time. And I guarantee you I never misunderstood it that way. If anything, I heard “gospel” and immediately thought of things I must do, do right, do consistently, so I won’t go to hell. Any extreme, any misunderstanding, is a problem. But our misunderstanding says something about the error in our current approach that need fixing. If you preach the gospel to lawless people, it will sound legalistic (“the gospel calls you to a changed life shaped by the cross”). If you preach the gospel to people who pride themselves on and base their confidence in their deeds, it will sound like lawlessness (“what you do isn’t the gospel; the gospel is about the finished work of Christ on the cross”). But consider this as well: if we don’t misunderstand the way Paul’s audience misunderstood, it might suggest that we aren’t talking about it the way he talked about it.

Paul proclaimed the gospel, then he said we have “nothing” to boast about. “You were saved by grace, through faith; and this is not of yourselves. Not by works, lest anyone should boast.” “Where is boasting?” asks Paul in Romans 3:27. “It is excluded.” Because my headline—the one about me—is this: “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” But Christ replaces that headline with a new one. Paul says “but

now, apart from any law, the righteousness of God has been revealed. This righteousness is GIVEN through faith to all who believe. Because all are falling-short sinners; but all are justified freely by HIS grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ. Which means God is both just and the justifier. So where is boasting? It is excluded.”

The headline of the gospel leaves no room for boasting. Whatever we call “the gospel”, whatever we determine is the “headline” that defines every aspect of life, must be something that leaves no room for boasting.

The gospel says God is king—and I am not. The gospel says Jesus paid the purchase price that I could never pay. The gospel says the kingdom is not something I can create. The gospel says salvation is a free gift. The gospel says sin doesn’t have to define us any more. The gospel says salvation belongs to our God. That is the gospel.

I’ve heard someone define grace this way: “grace is God setting up a plan by which I can save myself.” I don’t need to tell you how wrong that is. You already know how wrong that is. But here is what I can tell you. You could never get that from the gospel. But could you imagine someone saying that if the headline that defines their life is “my right actions get me out of my bad situation”? I sure can. There are lots of things connected to the gospel. Intimately connected to the gospel. Things that should be shared along with the gospel. Or that follows directly from the gospel. But it’s not the gospel.

But the gospel is not about receiving something; its about receiving someone who did the only fully-accomplishing thing. When I believe this gracious truth and move my allegiance to him, it shows in my life. Won’t you receive the gospel today?