

Sabbath School Lesson #3 – The Unity of the Gospel – 8-14 July 2017

Christ taught Paul the Gospel, which Paul preached, and Paul longed for his brethren to be in the unity of that Gospel. “Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, *being* of one accord, of one mind” (Philippians 2:2). Recall Galatians 1 to continue the narrative in chapter 2.

Another Visit to Jerusalem – “Fourteen years after” (2:1), following the natural course of the narrative, means fourteen years after the visit recorded in Galatians 1:18, which was three years after the Paul’s conversion. The second visit, therefore, was seventeen years after his conversion, or about the year 51 AD, which coincides with the time of the conference in Jerusalem, which is recorded in Acts 15. It is with that conference, and the things that led to it, and grew out of it, that the second chapter of Galatians deals. In reading this chapter, therefore, the fifteenth of Acts must be understood and borne in mind. Our study this week will thus necessarily be largely in Acts 15, of which Galatians 2 is merely an adjunct.

The New Gospel – In the first chapter of Galatians (verses 6-7) we are told that some were troubling the brethren, by perverting the Gospel of Christ, presenting a false gospel, and pretending that it was the true Gospel. In Acts 15:1 we read that “certain men which came down from Judea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye can not be saved.” This, we see, was the other gospel, which was not another, since there is only one, but which was being palmed off upon the brethren as the true Gospel. That these men who brought this teaching professed to be preaching the Gospel, is evident from the fact that they professed to tell the people what they must do to be saved. Paul and Barnabas would not give any place to the new preaching, but withstood it, in order, as Paul tells the Galatians, “that the truth of the Gospel might continue with you” (Galatians 2:5). Paul and Barnabas had “no small dissension and disputation with them” (Acts 15:2). The controversy was no insignificant one, but was between the real Gospel and a counterfeit – a vital question then as today.

A Denial of Christ – A glance at the experience of the church at Antioch, to whom this new gospel was brought, will show that it did in the most direct manner deny the power of Christ to save. The Gospel was first brought to them by brethren who had been scattered by the persecution that arose on the death of Stephen. These brethren came to Antioch “preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them; and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord” (Acts 11:19-21). Then the apostles sent Barnabas to assist in the work; and he, “when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord. For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord” (Acts 11:22-24). Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to find Saul, he brought him unto Antioch, and together they laboured with the church in Antioch for more than a year (verses 25-26). There were in the church prophets and teachers, and as they ministered unto the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost spoke to them, telling them to separate Barnabas and Saul to the work to which He had called them (Acts 13:1-3). So we see that the church there had had much experience in the things of God. They were acquainted with the Lord and His voice in the Spirit, who witnessed that they were children of God. And now after all this, these men said to them, “Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye can not be saved” (Acts 15:1). That was as much as to say, all your faith in Christ, and all the witness of the Spirit, are nothing without the sign of circumcision. The sign of circumcision, without faith, was exalted above faith in Christ without any outward sign. The new gospel was a most direct assault upon the Gospel, and a flat denial of Christ.

False Brethren – It is no wonder that Paul styles those who presented this teaching, “false brethren,” who had, as NLT says, “sneaked in” (Galatians 2:4). To the Galatians he said of them, “There be some that trouble you, and would pervert the Gospel of Christ” (Galatians 1:7). The apostles and elders, in their letter to the churches, said of those men, “Certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls” (Acts 15:24); they added that they “gave no commandment” to them. That is to say, these teachers were “false brethren,” who were not recognised by the apostles as teachers, who were speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after themselves. There have been many such since that time. So vicious was their work that the apostle said, “Let them be accursed.” They were deliberately seeking to undermine the Gospel of Christ, and thus to destroy the souls of the believers.

The Sign of Circumcision – These false brethren had said, “Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye can not be saved” (Acts 15:1). This put all the power of salvation in the outward sign of circumcision. Paul declares, “In Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love” (Galatians 5:6). Circumcision has no power, and uncircumcision has no power, but faith alone, working by love, is mighty to save. That which the false brethren wished to enforce was not real circumcision, for that is not outward, but in the heart, and consists solely in obedience to God’s law through faith (see Romans 2:25-29; 4:7-11). Abraham was righteous by faith alone, was in fact, really circumcised in heart “with the circumcision made without hands,” by the Spirit, before he received the outward mark, which was not real circumcision, but only

served as a sign, reminding him that circumcision consists in worshiping God in the spirit, and having no confidence in the flesh (Romans 4:2-11; Colossians 2:10-11; Philippians 3:3). Christians of Antioch, who had been converted from heathenism, as Abraham was, and received the Lord Jesus, were circumcised with the true circumcision. The “false brethren” wished them to give up the reality for the empty sign.

The Flesh Profiteth Nothing – Jesus said, “It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing; the words that I speak unto you, they are Spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63). The people of Antioch and Galatia had trusted in Christ for salvation; now there were some who sought to induce them to trust in the flesh. They did not tell them that they were at liberty to sin. Oh, no; they told them that they must keep the law! Yes, they must do it themselves; they must make themselves righteous without Jesus Christ. For circumcision stood for the keeping of the law. The real circumcision was the law written in the heart by the Spirit; but these “false brethren” wished believers to trust in outward form of circumcision, as a substitute for the Spirit’s work; so that the thing which was given as a sign of righteousness by faith, became only a sign of self-righteousness. The false brethren would have the believers circumcised for righteousness and salvation; but Peter said, “Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ we believe to be saved” (Acts 15:11). Paul also wrote, “With the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation;” “Whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Romans 10:10; 14:23). All the efforts of men to keep the law of God by their own power, no matter how earnest and sincere they may be, can never result in anything but imperfection. “But we are all as an unclean *thing*, and all our righteousnesses *are* as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away” (Isaiah 64:6). Let us surrender our lives to Christ and let Him do the law of God in us.

A Yoke of Bondage – When the question came up in Jerusalem, Peter said to those who would have men seek to be justified by their own works, instead of by faith in Christ, “Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” (Acts 15:10). This yoke was a yoke of bondage, as is shown by Paul’s words, that the “false brethren” sneaked in “to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage” (Galatians 2:4). Christ gives freedom from sin. His life is “the perfect law of liberty.” “By the law is the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20), but not freedom from it. “The law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good” (Romans 7:12), just because it gives the knowledge of sin by condemning it. It is a signpost, which points out the way, but does not carry us. It can tell us that we are out of the way; but Jesus Christ alone can make us walk in it; for He is the way. Sin is bondage (Proverbs 5:22). Only those who keep the commandments of God are at liberty (Psalm 119:45); and the commandments can be kept only by faith in Christ (Romans 8:3-4). We know therefore, whoever induces people to trust in the law for righteousness, without Christ, simply puts a yoke upon them, and fastens them in bondage. When a man has been convicted by the law as a transgressor, and cast into prison, he can not be delivered from his chains by the law which holds him there. But that is no fault of the law: just because it is a good law, it cannot say that a guilty man is innocent. The Galatians were brought into bondage by men who foolishly and vainly sought to exalt God’s law by denying Him who gave it, and in whom alone its righteousness.

Why Paul Went Up to Jerusalem – It says in Acts 15:2 that it was determined at Antioch that Paul and Barnabas should go up to Jerusalem about this matter. But Paul declares that he went up “by revelation” (Galatians 2:2). Paul did not go up simply on their recommendation, but the same Spirit moved both him and them. He did not go up to learn the truth of the Gospel, but to maintain it. He went, not to find out what the Gospel really is, but to communicate the Gospel which he had preached among the heathen. Those who were chief in the conference imparted nothing to him. The apostle had not been preaching for seventeen years that of which he stood in doubt. He knew whom he believed. He had not received the Gospel from any man (Galatians 1:1; 1 Corinthians 14:37), and he did not need to have any man’s testimony that it was genuine. When God has spoken, an endorsement by man is utter impertinence!

The Gospel Not Magic – The great lesson taught by this experience, to which Paul referred the Galatians, is that there is nothing in this world that can confer grace and righteousness upon men, and that there is nothing in the world that any man can do, that will bring salvation. The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation, and not the power of man. Any teaching that leads men to trust in any object, whether it be an image, a picture, or anything else, or to trust for salvation in any work or effort of their own, even though that effort be directed toward the most praiseworthy object, is a perversion of the truth of the Gospel, – a false gospel. There are in the church of Christ no ‘sacraments’ that by some sort of magical working confer special grace on the receiver; but there are things that a man who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, and who is thereby justified and saved, may do as an expression of his faith. The only thing in the world that has any efficacy in the way of salvation, is the life of God in Christ. Thus, to that end, the Apostle Paul wrote: “By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before prepared that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8-10).