

If you have your Bibles, why don't you go ahead and grab them? Galatians, chapter 1. We'll actually finish this chapter today, and then we'll have five months to do the next five. I just wanted to be straight with you so you don't think this is moving too quickly. We'll tackle this and then go forward.

Before we get to work on verses 11 through 24, I wanted to just very quickly remind you where we were last week. Paul just very quickly sets up the gospel and says, "Really anything other than this isn't a gospel at all. If you vary from this message, then you're no longer believing in a gospel that can save you." We just kind of very clearly last week set up what the gospel is and what the gospel is not.

We talked about the reality that you and I have fallen short of the glory of God. We are sinners. No one would be able to argue they're not a sinner. You have lied, which does make you a liar. You're not just a person who lies who is not a liar. You're a liar, all right? We have all some thievery in our backgrounds. We all have some, so we're all guilty. We're all in need of a righteousness that goes beyond our righteousness. Praise God he provided that for us in Jesus Christ.

God in the flesh, Christ, comes, and he lives a perfect life he imputes to us. That righteousness that was Christ's is given to us. Then on the cross of Christ, Jesus absorbs God's wrath towards our rebellion so for those who would believe and trust in by faith the grace of Jesus Christ, we are seen by God as holy, spotless, and blameless in his sight. Now when people hear that news, they have a tendency to either receive it or pervert it and make it no gospel at all, according to last week's text.

Some people will hear the good news of the gospel and think, *Man, that's just way too easy. I'm going to add to that so it's not just the life of Jesus and the death of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus. It's those things plus what I can bring to the table.* Some people make that error. They fill their lives with a billion different religious activities because they believe it's going to save them. Paul says, "Man, that's not the gospel at all."

Then other people don't go that route. They're more on the licentiousness side of things. What I mean by that is they hear the gospel, and to them, the gospel is good news because what they heard is, "I can do whatever I want, and God has to forgive me because of Jesus. So I'll live whatever way I want. I'll do whatever I want. Ultimately that's going to be fine because God has to forgive me in Jesus." Paul, again,

last week is going, "Neither one of these are the gospel. They're not variations of this. They aren't this at all."

So if you've been reading along in our group study, the Galatians guide, I think a great illustration they used was a vacuum seal is either a vacuum seal or it's not. If any air is in a vacuum seal at all, it's no longer a vacuum seal. That's kind of what the gospel is like. If you vary off of it, it no longer is the gospel. It might have some of the same shape of, but it ultimately is no gospel at all. So a gospel other than the gospel Paul is proclaiming ceases to be the gospel. That's where we were last week, and he is simply not going to let up on this. This for him is so important that he is not willing to go, "All right. You got me" and move on. He is going to just keep hammering away at this.

So let's look, picking it up in verse 11. **"For I would have you know..."** What's that next word?

"...brothers." So the appeal is to those who believe in Christ, or at least who *claim* to believe in Christ.

"For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel."

So he does a kind of brilliant play with words here because he is saying, "Hey, the gospel I preach, the true gospel, the real gospel is very different than man's gospel."

So man's gospel, regardless of the form it takes, whether that form is religious or irreligious, is always the same. Man's gospel is, "Here's the end goal. Here's my salvation. Here's what I'm after. Then it's reverse engineered back to where I am now. What do I need to do to get to my salvation?" So religiously, that is, "Here's my deity. Here's how I need to appease my deity. Here's how I get to heaven or in right standing with that god. So since that's my god, here are all the things I need to do to get to heaven or to get cool with God."

That's how it works itself out religiously, but man's gospel also works itself out irreligiously. So maybe you're an atheist in here today or an agnostic. Here's what I'd contend to you. You are just as religious as the religious people who bother you. You have dogma, you have doctrine, and you have faith, maybe even more faith than we have. What you do is you say, "Here is heaven, and there's not a real God. So here's what the purpose of life is. It's my own joy. It's happiness. It's comfort. Now here I am today. These are the things I have to do to get to this."

Maybe it's as simple as you don't want to be the bum that your old man was, or maybe it's more complex than that. Man's gospel, irreligiously works itself out in the control and manipulation of others, or just a licentiousness that says, "I'm going to do whatever makes me happy regardless of the wake of destruction I leave behind me." That's man's gospel. "This is what I do to get where I want to get." Paul says, "The gospel I preached to you wasn't like that at all. In fact, the gospel I preached to you was so christocentric as to make your role in any of it passive."

Now again, if you are in a group and you're doing the group study with us, Luther called the righteousness of Christ given to us a passive righteousness. All the righteousness we do is an active righteousness. We do it, but the joy God has in Christ's righteousness in us is that it's passive. We didn't do anything to get it. It's simply the free gift of God so none of could actually boast in it. The only thing we could boast in would be Christ.

Look at where he goes next here. **"For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ."** Now you should start picking up on this rhythm because he has already said that once before. He is saying it again. Then really he is going to say it a lot more near the end of chapter 1. He is going to go on and say it quite a bit through chapter 2. He is not going to get off of this, "No man shared this with me. No man trained me in this. No man talked to me about this." But we'll get to more of that in about 20 minutes. I'll come back to verse 12.

Let's look at verse 13. **"For you have heard of my..."** What? **"...former life..."** Now if you write in your Bible, if you underline in your Bible, if you make notes in your Bible, let me encourage you to just do that right now under that phrase "my former life." Now here's why. Because the gospel Paul preached that is not man's gospel carries a power that is not present within man's gospel of effort and discipline. The power that is present in God's gospel in Christ is the power to transform our current life into a former life. It holds the power to make... Regardless of how you've come in, regardless of how you've walked in here today, the offer on the table, in God's gospel is you don't have to leave like you came.

You can, once you receive the gospel offered, talk about your life as a *former* life, regardless of what it's filled with, regardless of how you came in. The offer on the table is to have a *former* life. Paul is a fascinating case study here. Let me show you why. Let's look at this. **"For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God..."** What's that word? **"...violently, and tried to..."** What? **"...destroy it."** Now this isn't hyperbole. When Paul says, "My former life in Judaism, I set out to violently destroy," he didn't have a blog. All right? This isn't a media blitz. This isn't, "I'm going to get on my Facebook page and blast them."

He literally killed people, murdered people, oppressed people, had men and women arrested and thrown into prison. Again, this isn't hyperbole. This is actually who he was. What he is doing here is he is taking something from you, whether you know it or not. He says, "You have heard of my former life, not in some sort of reincarnation type of 'I was a bull in an old life, and now that's why I'm so stubborn.'" That's not what he is saying. He is saying, "I once was a violent man." He is taking from you in this text the right to go, "God can't love me. God can't save me. I've gone too far."

Because Paul, if was having a beer with you (if he would do such a thing), would say, "So you murdered some people?" "No, man. I didn't murder anybody." "See, I did. I killed people, and God made that life a former life. I'm a *former* murderer. So it seems like whatever you're thinking is too big for God is really a brokenness in thinking." The reason I said he is such an interesting case study is he is going to outdo both disorders. Let's keep watching this. This so exposes the irony of external-based religion. Let's look at this.

"For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it." Listen to verse 14: **"And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers."** Now here's what makes Paul such a great study to lay on the table and watch the gospel make his life a former life. Not only is he violent and hostile, but on top of that, the motivation for his violence and hostility is his religious discipline. This exposes the hypocrisy in external-based religion because here's what he just said. Follow me. All right?

That line "tradition of my fathers" is a tagline for the law of Moses. So zealous was I for the law of Moses that I violated the law of Moses to defend and protect the law of Moses. So zealous was I to defend the law that I broke the law." That's very J. Edgar Hoover-ish. Some of you will be with me on that. Some of you will be lost. I can't do anything to clean it up with the time I have. Do you see the irony of external-based religion? So if you've been around self-righteous people, here's kind of a personality trait present in them all. They are hyperaware of your shortcomings and cannot see their own at all.

They are deeply in tune with where you fall short but for the life of them cannot see their own shortcomings at all. Even though their own shortcomings are causing a lot of problems in their own worlds, they tend to blame that on that they're so pure and so upright that people just don't like to do life with them because they do it like it should be done. No, you have a personality disorder, and you're self-righteous. That's why we tend to not like to be around you. Right? Because you tend to be harshly judgmental, and you disguise it under a nuance of spirituality. You attach Jesus' name to your self-righteousness, and that is a problem.

Paul, literally, by his testimony, says, "This was my former life. I so loved the law that I violated the law. I was a violent and deplorable man." But he says, "That's who I *used* to be. That's not who I am. Really the thing I want you to consider is this gospel offer is still on the table. Maybe you came in, and you are, like our boy Paul, self-righteous. If you're being made aware of that, the Holy Spirit is at work, because most self-righteous people don't know they're self-righteous. Hence, the self-righteousness!

If you're getting in tune with that, that's an act of God. That is you being wooed, rescued, and redeemed out of a false gospel. Maybe you've come in here today, and you have train wrecked your life. Maybe all the adjectives people would use to describe you are dark and devastating adjectives. The offer from Jesus is, "Those don't have to be adjectives on your life anymore. You can have a former life. You can have an, 'I used to be.'"

Then, for me, this text just keeps getting... I've been hyper this week because of this text. I know some of you think I am regardless, but this text fueled that a little bit more than usual. Look at verse 15. **"But when he who had set me apart before I was born..."** Now we have to do something with that, don't we, because here's what we just heard. You have Paul who was a violent and deplorable human being who used the law to oppress and hard press people who loved Jesus. According to this text, God, through all of that, had a plan for the life of Paul that really was sealed into Paul when he was in the womb.

Now that has implications for what we talked about a few weeks ago on the sanctity of human life, and that has a bearing, that has a weight on the spectacular beauty of the patience of God when it comes to you and me. That God would allow us to mouth off, that God would allow us to shake our fists at heaven, that God would allow us to walk in certain things, patiently waiting out the day that he would call us...hear me...according to his grace, not according to our works.

Paul isn't saved, isn't redeemed, because he is bringing something to the table. It wasn't because of his grandeur at Jewishness, his ability to walk in Judaism, that actually saved him. In fact, the irony of ironies is God saves a Jew and sends him to the Gentiles. More on that here in a second. So ultimately, regardless of, again, how you've come into this place today, you have this offer on the table. The Holy Spirit is just stealing from you any lie you might be able to embrace and believe. Because if you're coming in going, "You have no idea what I've done," the Scripture just said, "Yeah, God knows what you've done, and he hasn't destroyed you. So he might have a plan here." Let's keep going.

"But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace..." Listen to this. **"...was..."** What? **"...pleased to reveal his Son to me."** Now I have certain little rules I do when I'm reading my Bible. Here's one. If I see the word *pleased* or *pleasure*, I circle it and underline it, specifically if it's in reference to God because I want to know what pleases the heart of God. What brings pleasure, the emotion of pleasure to the Creator of the universe? Did you see what causes pleasure to well up in the heart of God? Revealing the Son to Paul.

Man, I just think most of us can't get our minds around that, that it brought God pleasure that day. So he had patiently endured with all of Paul's blasphemies and foolishness and the hard pressing of Paul on his people. He had patiently just watched, didn't destroy him. Let me tell you something. If we're believers in

the first century, we're wanting a lightning bolt, a plague, something to happen to our boy Saul. God just quietly lets Paul run. Then on the road to Damascus with a great deal of pleasure, he reveals to Paul, Jesus, and it brings his heart joy, pleasure. Oh, if you could understand that it would bring pleasure to the heart of the Lord for you to take him up on the offer of a former life.

Let's keep going. I love this next batch here. "**...was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles...**" So now you have the pleasure of God in revealing the Son and reconciling Paul to God. Now he is going to use Paul in ways that Paul could have never imagined. All right? Now again I think this has some weight to bear on us today because I think we have a tendency to think of ourselves in ways that are kind of smaller than how God can use and how God tends to use men.

So if we got Paul's résumé, if Paul sent in his résumé and said, "Hey, I'd love to be a missionary. I'd love to plant churches all over the world." We read his résumé. You can find his résumé over in the book of Philippians. He is a varsity-level Jew. All right? He is a Hebrew of Hebrews, of the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised on the eighth day, a Pharisee of Pharisees, which means he had the Torah memorized. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy memorized.

I would wager that a bulk of us have never made it through the book of Numbers. Every year, the One Year Study Bible comes around, we get to about chapter 9 and forget it. Head to the Psalms or to 1 John or to something like that. We get bogged down in Leviticus and Numbers. Paul has it memorized. He literally says that when it comes to the law, he is faultless. I don't know anyone I've ever met who could say that. So if we're reading his résumé, I'll tell you where I'm sending him: Jerusalem.

"Oh, you want to plant churches and share the gospel with people? You know this culture. You know this context. You know everything from the dietary laws to the festivals. Who could talk to the Jews more articulately than a man who was so immersed in the Jews that he was considered the up and comer, the next great one? This is where we'll send you." But God is like, "Oh, no, no, no. I'm sending you to the Gentiles, to the pagans you don't quite understand, who you haven't really spent a lot of time with."

I mean, Paul had been in a schooling system that had him immersed with other rabbis discussing the Torah. God saves them and sends them to the Gentiles. So here's the way I want to constantly edify you. You have been uniquely wired and uniquely gifted by God. You've been drawn to certain hobbies, drawn to certain habits, placed in certain neighborhoods, and given certain positions that you might reflect the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ in powerful ways to the world around you so that my hope is you wouldn't be so bored in life but rather would enjoy the life you've been given as you see the eternal weight of it.

To give you an example, my son played 6-and-under basketball this year. The last game was Saturday. Praise God! It was an epic battle: 12-8 I think was the final score. We went. My son doesn't care about the game. He just likes playing with the guys. He really could not care less, win or lose. He doesn't up and down like that. For him, it's time to play with his buddies. I'm praying God will sustain that for a while. I don't need life and death depending on a victory or a loss, hopefully ever. Okay? Maybe that's for somebody in here for free, okay?

Ultimately, though, for me and for my wife, that game and that time in that little bitty gym with little 8-foot goals where all the dads are dunking when their sons miss to feel masculine or something, to relive some glory days that probably never existed, for us, that room has much greater meaning than my son getting social skills or learning how to dribble the ball. For us, I want to encourage the saints who are there, the people I know who love the Lord. I want to ask them how life is. I want to encourage them. For those who don't know the Lord, we have this interaction.

I'm not going to run into them at work. So I have an opportunity to just ask questions. I have to kind of fight through the barrier of, "Oh, you're a pastor. Okay." I have to get through that. So I can view Saturday morning at an elementary school as far more eternally significant than my boy working towards a scholarship that isn't coming. Now, I mean, God is a God of miracles. Maybe, but I'm just saying if I look at the genetic code, it's not coming! So this makes Saturday at the elementary school monumentally bigger than just the game. It carries the weight of eternity with it. My neighborhood. God will use you in bigger ways than you could ever imagine.

You simply have to step out in obedience to where God has placed you and what he has called you to be: salt and light in the world around you. Okay, now let me show you this. I know some of you are like, *Okay, I'm in. Okay, I get it. You don't have to keep doing this. We understand this is the gospel. These things aren't the gospel.* Let me just press *pause* here and maybe try to correct very quickly what you might be thinking. If right now in your head you're thinking, *You're right. I need to get better at these things. In fact, while you were preaching, Matt, I saw a spiritual profiling app I can download. I've already begun to feel... I'm going to read my Bible. I'm going to join a home group.*

You have a whole list of things you're going to do as soon as this is over. Look at me. You're not listening. You're not hearing me. That is a false gospel, not the true gospel. The true gospel is an ability to rest in your acceptance in Christ that then leads to actions flowing out of your acceptance in Christ. It flows out of rest and out of delight in the reconciling work of Christ. Not, "Let me *do* in order to *be*," but, "Because I *am*, let me *do*." Are you tracking with me on that? Okay, two of you. Excellent. All right. Let's get back to work.

Now let me show you this interesting part. Let's finish. **"...in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus."** Now all he is doing right here is unpacking a historic account of his conversion and what happened immediately after his conversion.

You can read all of that in Acts, chapter 9. It's a spectacular story. Paul is on his way to Damascus with legal documents that are going to allow him to hard press, imprison, and violently attack the church in Damascus. On the way, Jesus kicks him off his horse. "Why are you persecuting me?" "Who are you?" "I'm Jesus the Christ." He blinds Paul. In fact, scales cover his eyes. He can't see. Paul then is taken into Damascus where God comes to a man named Ananias and says, "I want you to go heal Paul. He is blind. I blinded him. Go heal him." I love Ananias for just the honesty that's in Acts 9.

Ananias raises his hand and goes, "Wait. You want me to go pray and heal the guy who has been sent here to kill us?"

"Yeah!"

"Saul? I'm in. I'm going to do this, but if I get shanked I'm going to be upset." Don't start looking for *shank* in your electronic Bibles. This is a paraphrase, all right? You have to follow this.

Ananias goes. He tells Paul, "I've been sent by God." He prays over Paul. Scales fall off his eyes. He is able to see. He is baptized. He eats a meal, and he goes into the synagogue and immediately begins to preach the gospel. Now here is the \$5 million question... *Who told Paul the gospel?* Jesus didn't on the road. Go read it. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Jesus, who you're persecuting."

"Oh, okay." Blind.

Ananias doesn't. "God sent me here to heal you. God is going to do big things through you." Who teaches Paul the gospel? No one. That's his point. Then look where he goes after this. This is going to be, just so you understand me well, for you and for me descriptive not prescriptive. Let me explain that.

Let's pick it up in verse 18. **"Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas [that's Peter] and remained with him 15 days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, 'He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.' And they glorified God because of me."**

Now he is laying out the historic account of his life that you can read about in Acts 9:1 through verse 15. You'll see when we come back in next week he is going to continue to do this. Paul is violently attacked by the Jewish remnant, as you can imagine. If he is the up and comer, if he is the one who is going to take Gamaliel's spot as the super-Pharisee and he has papers from the Pharisees to persecute the church of Jesus Christ, and along the way to exact vengeance upon the church of Jesus Christ, he gets there, goes into the synagogue, and then immediately begins to preach against the Pharisees, you think there's a special hatred for him?

Now maybe for all of the church, but probably specifically for Paul, which is why they so ruthlessly try to kill him repeatedly... In fact, if you remember Damascus, they have to lower him off the wall in a basket to save his life. Then he goes away, and he comes back. You follow him. They beat him and leave him for dead multiple times. They beat the skin off his back. They beat him with rods. He's shipwrecked twice. The brutal life he leads from defecting from what he saw as enemies of the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

His point in all of this is, "Listen, no one trained me in the gospel. In my interaction with the other apostles, they did not train me. They did, however, hear me proclaim the gospel and were in hearty approval of what I was preaching." This text is meant to create in us awe and a deep confidence in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because here's why. The apostles walked with Jesus. They walked with him. They knew him. When they're writing what Jesus said, it's because they heard him say it. When they're telling stories of the life of Christ, they're telling stories they saw.

In fact, Luke, at the beginning of Luke, is saying, "This is a testimony of what we have seen with our eyes and heard with our ears." These are things they saw. Now here's the miracle. Here's the Pauline defense of his ministry. "I'm preaching the same gospel. I'm saying the same things, that I did not walk with Jesus on earth, and I was not trained by the apostles." Here's why for you and for me this is descriptive and not prescriptive. Because what Paul is saying as an *Apostle* is that I have direct revelation from Jesus Christ about the life of Jesus Christ, and that is stamped by the apostles who heard the same thing.

So how do I know what Jesus said and know the gospel of Jesus Christ, have a direct revelation from Jesus Christ that the apostles also have? You and I are not *Apostles*. Are you tracking with me? So what I mean by that is no one in here gets to say, "Thus saith the Lord..." No one! Not unless you are holding this Book. Not unless you're opening this up and reading it and saying, "Thus saith the Lord..." Now let me clarify here. Do I believe the Bible teaches that God encourages and edifies his people through words of knowledge, through visions, through dreams, through prophetic utterances?

Yes, but those words never run in contrary to the Scriptures. The Scriptures become the filter by which those words are defined and clarified, so our position becomes, "I believe, I think the Holy Spirit wants me to share this with you. It's my understanding that as I prayed and as I sought the Lord, I was to bring this before you." But the ultimate guide of whether or not you heard correctly was the Word of God and time, because if you come and you say something contrary to the Word, then someone is lying, and it's you. Or the spirit you heard that from was not the Holy Spirit.

At some point in our time together, Lord willing, I would love to just do a week or two on how this Book got put in your hands, how it was written, how it got put in your lap. There were dozens if not hundreds of men who were brutally killed to keep this Book away from you. Do you realize what you've been gifted and what you've been given when you have the revealed Word of God at an access that 200 years ago men couldn't even fathom? Do you know how much more powerful ministers are if you don't have this Book and they have this Book? Do you know what kind of manipulation can occur if you don't have the Word but I have the Word?

Here's the thing. Everything I'm saying today, I'm letting you see in your Book and you can cross-reference it, and you can go, "You know, I don't know about that, Chandler. I'm reading this here. What about this?" I get to be held accountable not only by God but by you. You have been given the same revelation I've been given. Ultimately when Paul says, "No man trained me. No man talked to me," this is meant to cause us to marvel, not to try to be like Paul. "Nobody is going to train me either. I just think God says this." "Well, no, buddy. *You* say this. God says *this*."

With a great deal of humility, we approach the revealed Word of God and apply the revealed work of God and marvel at how God has revealed himself to us in the Scriptures. Now here's what I want to bring you back to. How we do video testimonies is they get sent to us earlier in the week to watch, so I knew Pedro's testimony before we showed it this weekend. When I watch it, here's the thing I always marvel at: *How odd is that? Pedro and his wife agreed to share their deepest, most intimate, darkest secrets with 11,000 strangers.*

Who does that? Who says, "Hey, man. I was molested when I was a kid, and then I got addicted to pornography. It almost cost me my marriage, but then Christ and his gospel intervened. Now that's my former life." Next weekend we're going to baptize dozens and dozens and dozens and dozens of people across our campuses. People are going to get in the water, and they're going to talk about things you don't talk about at dinner.

Now why are they able to do that? This takes us back to the pleasure of God in revealing Jesus to Paul and saving him and reconciling his past and using it in the present. Pedro's glory wasn't, "Look how bad I was." Pedro's glory is God's glory and that God saved him despite him. Pedro is a great example of, "My former life." So if Paul is able to say, "Many of you have heard of my former life in Judaism," what I know is that most of us aren't filling in the blank like that.

Now there are a couple of you who could fill in the gap like that. I know there was a young woman in one of our services who was saved out of Judaism, even recently, and shared her story with us the last time we did baptism weekends, but that's not most of us. Most of us, the former life we need to proclaim is that we were busy with a thousand religious activities, but we didn't know the gospel. Jesus saved us. "My former life is that I was a deacon and a Sunday school teacher and a church man, but I didn't know him."

Or, our former life needs to be, "Listen, I went to church four or five times a year. I went to church Christmas and Easter. I had Christian in my title of who I was, but in reality, I had no idea who Jesus was. My life didn't match up with the gospel calling on my life. I just didn't know. So in my former life, this is what I treasured. This is what I pursued, and Jesus saved me. In my former life, this is what I treasured, and this is what I pursued, but Jesus saved me."

The offer on the table in the gospel is that regardless of how you came in today, you don't have to leave that way. Any lie you would try to believe was decimated in this text. Maybe you're an intellect. As I walked through Paul being set apart from the womb and the pleasure of God in revealing himself to Paul, maybe what you did... Maybe you're linear, a bit analytical. Maybe what you did is you said, *Well, okay, Chandler, but what I have not been called from the womb. What if God is not pleased to reveal Jesus Christ to me? What if I'm an outlier? What if there will be no salvation for me?*

Well, I'll speak very frank and very fair to you. That's a possibility, but I'd rather us look at the objective evidence of today. Where are you? It doesn't look like God is at work hardening your heart. You're at church on a day where the gospel is being heralded. You're at church on a day where the new life is being offered up, laid out. Here it is. You can leave different than you came. It seems that your attendance here today would actually be an objective evidence of God's pursuit of you, not God's hardening of you towards the gospel. Because here's why. There are better places to be.

I have things to do. Do you not have things to do? I have three kids, which means my house is a mess and needs some repair. My wife is sick. I have an ever-growing task list. I have tons of things that need to get done. Not only that, but I work hard during the week. It would have been great to just sleep in today. It would be great to be grilling something right now. It would be great just to enjoy the winter-ish type day. I'm no fool. Some of you didn't want to come. You got dragged here by your spouse. Some of you got dragged here by your parents.

Some of you randomly woke up today and decided this was going to be one of those five weekends of the year you actually come to church. So if there is a God...and since we're in church, we contend that there is...could you being here today, maybe even against your will, be an objective evidence that God is wooing and drawing and wanting you to hear that forgiveness and mercy has been made available to you in Jesus Christ? Oh, that you might hear and respond. Oh, that you might join the mass of those who would be able to say, "In my former life..." Because that's what's made available to you in Jesus.

So how does that work, and how does that happen? It involves confession, repentance, and moving forward the community of faith. The gospel is not just personal. It creates a corporate identity. We encourage one another, love one another, walk with one another. Just to clarify, when I say *former* self, I'm not saying, "Trust in Jesus today. You're never going to stumble and fall again." I'm not saying that. What I'm saying is that in trusting Christ for your new life, your old life becomes former, and you are not enslaved by your former life.

Which means you will fall short, but in falling short, you won't be crushed by your failures but rather encouraged by the grace of God made available to you in Jesus Christ despite your failures. That's where our hope is. Hope isn't in my perfection. God help me if my hope is in my perfection. That's active righteousness. That's a false gospel.

So I'm pleading with you today to hear and receive the offer of new life that you might be able to join with so many of us and go, "In my former life, this is what I was. But in my new life in Christ, this is who he has made me. This is who he is making me." So we're going to pray. We're going to sing to the Lord and make much of the Lord in his saving work, because if you do have a former life, that is not owed to some sort of active righteousness but rather the passive righteousness of Jesus Christ. You didn't get you that. That was given to you freely.

We celebrate the fact that we've been saved by faith and grace. We do that by singing to the Lord. At the end of that, there will be some men and women who come up front. Maybe for the first time in your life, you come and go, "Man, I think the Lord has done something in my heart today. I am clearly seeing, and I

want this life to be a former life. I want to press on into obedience with Jesus Christ. I want to follow him and serve him and walk in his acceptance and love." I want to encourage you to do that.

I think the most difficult group is going to be that group that has been in church for a long, long time. In my time here, we've been able to see a man get up and claim, "Listen, I was a deacon. I was heavily involved. I taught Sunday school." A woman said, "I taught Sunday school for years. I just never knew the Lord. What kept me from even confessing that is I was embarrassed that I had been in church for so long and didn't know him." I'm saying the offer stands especially for you.

For me, is it miraculous when someone in witchcraft comes to know the Lord? Yes, but it's just as miraculous, if not maybe even for me more miraculous, when God saves among church folk. So many of them have been inoculated to Jesus just enough to not need him. They can talk the language just enough to not understand they're way outside of the kingdom in a false gospel. Oh, that he might move well in your hearts today. That's not on me. That's on the Spirit. Let's pray.

Jesus, help us. Holy Spirit, I pray for my brothers and sisters who are stuck in false gospels, whose confidence is in them and not you, whose lives have not been transformed in any way by this great and glorious gospel. Might your power to save be evident among us, that many of us might walk out of here with former lives where before we didn't possess former lives. I ask you, Holy Spirit, to do what only you can do now. I pray that you would break down walls of pride, a refusal to consider, a refusal to let the weight of the world bear down on us, and that we might repent and trust fully in you. Thank you that you are good and you do good. It's for your beautiful name, amen.

Love you guys.