

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:  
Pastor Stephen Felker  
Swift Creek Baptist Church, 18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834  
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## Galatians 1:6-9          “How to Avoid Becoming a Cult Victim”

Intro. One of the oldest stories known to man is one of deception. Eve was in the Garden of Eden one day. Evidently, she was near the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the one from which God said they should never eat. The old devil, in the form of a serpent, spoke to Eve. “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?’” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.’” Then the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So we are told that the woman took of its fruit and ate (Genesis 3:1b-6). Eve believed the devil’s lie, sinned against God, and along with Adam’s willful disobedience, they plunged the human race into sin, sorrow, and death. Ever since, humanity has had a problem with being deceived.

The Galatian believers also had the same problem. Paul had preached the good news of the grace of God. They experienced forgiveness of sin, peace with God, and joyful living in Jesus Christ. But some time after Paul left to do missionary work elsewhere, other teachers and preachers came in among them, and according to my text today, led them astray. As he says in v.6, they were turning away from Him who called them in the grace of Christ to a completely different gospel. They didn’t even realize that they had been slipped a false gospel. They did not discern the true faith, from a false one. As a result, the original Greek of v.6 indicates that they were in the process of a defection from Christ Himself. They were becoming deserters. They were being lured into spiritual adultery. Paul was surprised that they had been deceived and turned from so quickly. Later in chapter 3 he says, “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth....” They were like children who had failed to exercise discernment.

I believe we face the same problem today. There is a confusing array of religious claims in our world today. Islam, Hinduism, Mormonism, New Age religion, and various forms of Christianity make conflicting claims. America alone has 350 sects and cults.<sup>1</sup> Many today believe that there is no absolute truth, and all religions will ultimately lead to heaven. But how can conflicting religions be right and true? And this issue is more relevant today than ever before. Jesus warned in Mt. 24:11, concerning the last times, “Many false prophets shall arise and deceive many.” The ultimate deception is coming from the antichrist (2 Thess. 2:9-10). And the consequence of deception can be deadly. The pit of hell is covered with what may seem to be solid ground, but many have fallen into the pit, having been deceived.

What we need is discernment. Daniel Doriani said, “Discernment is the insight, the understanding, the perception, to see things as they are from God’s perspective. It is the ability to discriminate between biblical and unbiblical voices....”<sup>2</sup> I want you to be able to know the difference between truth and error in the realm of religion and faith. You need to be able to recognize false teaching when you hear it or read it. So I want to draw from our text several steps to

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations* (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1979), 410 (illus. #1524).

<sup>2</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2001), 113.

take that will help you discern truth from error, and avoid the same mistake the Galatians made. After all, Paul's hope in writing this letter was to turn the Galatians back to the truth and avert spiritual disaster.

Now the first step I want you to take is this:

## I. BELIEVE THE WARNING THAT FALSE TEACHERS ARE OUT TO DECEIVE YOU

Actually, deception, and a lack of discernment, is everywhere. We are deceived economically. Have you ever ordered something from a TV commercial that looked so good, but when you got it, it was not what you thought it was? We are deceived relationally. Did you ever date a guy or girl that appeared to be one thing, only to find out later that they were something different? However, the worse kind of deception is spiritual deception. Temptation to sin involves deception. James describes temptation like the bait on a hook. To the fish the bait looks so tempting, but it can end in death for the fish that doesn't know the difference between real food and bait. Even so, the object of temptation looks good, looks gratifying, but when we are deceived by it, it results in guilt, bondage, and even death.

Another kind of religious deception is false doctrine. V. 7 says, "...there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ." That was a fact then, and that is a fact today. There are those who pervert the gospel. The word translated "pervert" (*metastrepho*) means "to reverse, to change to the opposite." Many false teachers are not sinister. They are deceived themselves. But the danger of false doctrine is just as real, regardless of their motives or sincerity. Then, v. 9 says, "As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed." Paul is referring to an earlier visit, not to the preceding clause. From the start of his ministry among them, Paul had warned them of the fact that others would probably come along, and preach some other gospel. I believe what he said to the Ephesian believers was characteristic of his practice, "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things" (Acts 20:28-30). Parents, have you ever given your child a warning, only to find them disregarding your warning some time later? That's what the Galatians had done. They had failed to heed Paul's warning. Disregarding parental warnings can be deadly! And disregarding the warnings of the Bible can be deadly as well! And since the Galatians had disregarded the earlier warning, they had earned the reprimand.

Now false teaching is serious business. It is so serious that twice in this text Paul pronounces an *anathema* upon those who preach a different gospel. The word refers to someone or something doomed to destruction, accursed, damned. This word is used in the Old Testament of a person or thing set apart and devoted to destruction, because it is hateful to God. You may think that Paul is being very harsh here. But what kind of judgment do you think Osama Ben Laden & others deserve? All of the hijackers engaged in some form of deception in order to accomplish their deadly act. Now if you understand how such people deserve judgment on the physical level, why is it difficult to understand the same principle on the spiritual and eternal level? Jesus said in Mark 9:42, "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea." In light of that teaching, we understand why Paul's language in vv. 8-9 is so strong. A significant number of contemporary preachers have removed the cross from their message, lest they offend certain people. I fear what will happen to such preachers. They may be drawing the favor of man, but they are subjecting themselves to the wrath of God! There are cult missionaries who are very sincere,

but because they are preaching a different gospel, they are also subjecting themselves to destruction.

Therefore, the first thing I want you to do is to accept the fact that false teachers are out to deceive you. You need to know that the enemy is out there, and that you need to put up your guard. 1 Peter 5:8 says, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” Therefore, the Scripture says, “Watch, and pray.” Secondly,

## II. RECOGNIZE THE DECEPTIVE METHODS OF FALSE TEACHERS

In vv. 6 & 7 Paul corrects a misconception on the part of the Galatians. He says, “I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another...” They thought the gospel of the Judaizers was just another, similar gospel. They probably regarded the gospel Paul preached as not so very different from the message of the Judaizers. So Paul makes it clear that the message they were turning to was completely different. He calls it “another” gospel. The Greek word translated “another” is *heteros*, which means “another of a different kind.” It refers to a qualitative difference. They were turning to a completely different gospel. Theirs was a gospel in name only.

Here is what was so deceptive: The Judaizers taught many of the same truths. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. They believed in His sacrificial atonement and His resurrection. The Judaizers did not challenge the basic facts of the gospel. The heresy they were promoting concerned the interpretation of those facts. Furthermore, false teachers want you to believe that they are giving just an improvement of the same Gospel you already believe. That’s what the Mormons do. They claim to believe in Jesus. Don’t you be gullible about this! So they add to it and subtract some things from it, and say this is better. But anticipating this problem, Rev. 22:18-19 says, “...If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life...” They did not purport to overtly deny the gospel but to improve it by adding the requirements, ceremonies, and standards of the Old Covenant to the New. The Judaizers would say, “Brother Paul is accurate as far as he goes, but he doesn't go far enough. We believe in Jesus Christ also - *but*, we have something important to add to what you already believe.” As if any man could “add” something better to the grace of God! This is one of the oldest heresies known, adding something to the gospel of grace.

Actually, when you add to the gospel, you change the gospel. The addition of Mosaic regulations was in the nature of a complete repudiation of the all sufficiency of Christ’s redemption. So whether as restrictive legalism, permissive liberalism, or cultic perversion, any teaching that adds to or takes away from God’s revealed truth is a distortion of the gospel and perverts the nature and the work of Christ.

So just because a religion has some or a lot of truth to it does not mean it is good for you. A beverage may be very healthful and refreshing, but when a drop of poison is added to it, something good becomes deadly. The devil is always perverting the gospel. His religions have some truth in them. He is the master of deception. Jesus said of the devil in John 8:44, “...he is a liar and the father of it.” John tells us of “the great dragon who deceives the whole world” (Rev. 12:9). Therefore, some add to the gospel. Others take away from the gospel. The liberal preachers & professors say that parts of the Bible aren’t true. It is very important that you do not allow yourselves to be deceived. Don’t be deceived by a religion that has a mixture of truth and error. Remember, those who deny Christ altogether are easily recognized as unbelievers; but those who

claim to teach and follow Christ, while undermining the gospel of His grace, are immeasurably more dangerous.

So in v.7 Paul makes it clear that their “gospel” is not just “another” gospel. There the word translated “another” is a different word. It is *allos*, which means “another of the same kind.” It is not an alternate gospel, it is an opposition gospel. God has not given you a “cafeteria” approach to religion. You can’t pick and choose which one you want. There is one gospel and only one gospel and all others are counterfeits. So you need to watch out for those who affirm many of the truths you hold, while adding some claims, and taking away others.

Next:

### III. DON'T PLACE FAITH IN A TEACHER BASED ON THEIR CREDENTIALS

Paul said in v.8, “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.” Paul is saying that the source of the message is not as important as the content. Paul is anticipating one objection to Paul’s rebuke. They could have said, “But the Judaizers had impressive credentials. They claimed to be from the Jerusalem church and authorized by James, the leader of that church” (see Acts 15:24). Paul says, “I don’t care if an angel preached to you. If what they preached is different from the Gospel, they deserve damnation!” Why did Paul say that even a message from an angel was not to be trusted? The Jews believed that the divine law came through angels (cf. Heb. 2:2), and the Judaizers may have made the point that this made the Old Covenant and its attendant ceremonies and traditions blinding.

So the point is don’t be deceived by outward appearances, or the persona of the speaker. Paul said in 2 Cor. 11:14-15, “And no marvel; for Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore, it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness....”

Let me give some specific examples of outward criteria that are unreliable. Don’t judge a speaker based on popularity. Popularity is not necessarily a sign of God’s favor. Jesus warned, “and many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive *many*” (Mt. 24:11). In fact, false prophets are more interested in popularity than in truth. 1 John 4:5 says, “They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them.” Just because the person seems very religious doesn’t mean that much (2 Cor. 11:14-15). Many liberal ministers or cult missionaries can be very nice. Many false teachers are popular because they seem to be warm and pleasant. Nor is a preacher credible based on his or her education. A doctor’s degree does not mean that the speaker is giving out the truth. Nor should miraculous signs and wonders be any proof that a man is preaching the truth. Jesus said, “For there shall arise false Christ’s, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders, insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect” (Mt. 24:24). What counts most in judging a minister or ministry is their faithfulness to God’s Word (Isa. 8:19, 20; I Tim. 4; I Jn. 4:1-6). The truth outranks anyone’s credentials. And that leads to the next step:

### IV. COMPARE THE MESSAGE WITH GOD’S WORD

Notice how in vv. 8 & 9 Paul’s standard of judging is the message that the Galatians had received. Likewise, 1 Cor. 15:1 says, “Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand.” In all these verses Paul gives the teaching of Jesus and His apostles as the standard by which all faith claims are to be judged. At

first the teaching of the apostles was only given orally. But now we have that oral message in written form, which is called the New Testament. And the point is that any message that goes beyond that (a probable meaning of *para* here, translated “other”), is not of God.

If a fisherman were to brag about how big the fish was that he caught, he might say it was 24 inches. How do you know if he is right? The best way is to use a reliable standard to measure his claim by. Get a yardstick, hold it next to the fish, and you will know if he is telling the truth.

So in order to recognize what is false, you have to know what is true. That means you need to read and study the Bible for yourself. Then, you should also bring your Bible to S.S. & Church, and compare what you hear with what the Bible says. Today, the cults primarily prey upon present or former church goers who do not know God’s Word. Yet, a recent study showed that 58% of Americans cannot name even 5 of the 10 Commandments, and just under half know that Genesis is the first book of the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

One main area of biblical truth that you should watch out for is grace verses works. In v.6 Paul says that they were “turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ.” God had extended to them that wonderful call to salvation and to become His children. The call was issued by grace. We did not deserve the invitation; it was all of grace. The only gospel of God is the gospel of grace, which is the gospel of divine redemption totally apart from any work or merit of man (Eph. 2:8-10). And we not only are saved by grace, but we live by grace. It is absurd to accept a gracious salvation and then endeavor to maintain righteousness through human efforts, ceremonies, and ritual. False teachers misrepresent the results of a gospel of grace, saying that it cannot save and that it leads to an immoral lifestyle since it does not require legalistic works for salvation.

Finally, to make my message complete, I add one more step for discernment that is not found in my text, but is found elsewhere:

## V. SEEK THE LEADING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Paul later says in Gal. 5:18 that we can be “led by the Spirit.” 1 John 2:27 says, “But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.” That means that you are not dependent upon human teachers to understand the basic teachings of the Word of God. The Holy Spirit has been given to us to help us discern truth from error. We must rely upon Him. Seek His guidance in prayer. Listen to the Spirit within you. He will convict you, and remove God’s peace, if what you are hearing is false doctrine. Also, as you learn God’s Word, He will lead you by bringing to your mind certain Scriptures that refute false doctrine.

Conclusion: I remember when I was a teenager, and I was just starting a quest to know the truth about God, salvation, and the Christian life. And my grandmother Felker was a subscriber to the magazine called *The Plain Truth*, published by Garner Ted Armstrong. Well, with a title like that, I thought it must be the truth, and it had interesting-sounding articles. So I started reading it. At first I enjoyed what I was reading. But the more I read, the more I felt that something wasn’t right about what I was reading. I came to realize that the Holy Spirit was convicting me that there was error mixed in with the truth. So if you will pray and be sensitive to the Holy Spirit, He will lead you to recognize truth and error.

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<sup>3</sup> Sociologist Alan Wolfe in *Christianity Today*, 10/03.

So I call upon you to take the 5 steps to avoid deception: Believe the biblical warnings regarding false teaching, recognize the methods of the false teachers, don't be deceived by the credentials of false teachers, study & learn God's Word as the standard to discern false teaching, and be led by the Holy Spirit.

Sources: W.A. Criswell, *Expository Sermons on Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973); Oliver B. Greene, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians* (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, 1962); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Galatians & Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968); J.B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957); John F. MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Galatians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 5 (Pasadena: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Lehman Strauss, *Devotional Studies in Galatians and Ephesians* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1957); Curtis Vaughan, *Galatians: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on 1:1-10 dated 8/5/84); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Free: Galatians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1975); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Galatians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1944, 1973). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).