

Intolerant of the Tolerant

By Ken Willig

The world wants God to be tolerant—understanding, compassionate—grade on the curve, overlook our sins and consider that we are human and not perfect. God is love, isn't He? Surely a loving God would not send a person to hell. Would He? That's not fair. Well, maybe fair for a murderer but not fair for those who try to be good, the best they can be.

But the God of the Bible is not tolerant. In fact, He is intolerant of the tolerant. He is perfect and just. He does not grade on the curve. He would not be perfect if He were not just. And justice requires punishment for sin and we all sin. So, we all deserve punishment. Fortunately, Jesus came to give us good news about how He has dealt with this punishment on our behalf. How and where we will spend eternity depends entirely of our accurate understanding of this good news—*the Gospel*.

The Gospel! The word *Gospel* means good news! Really good news! But *the Gospel* is a very special form of good news—the best and most important news that any human being will ever hear. This Gospel is the central message of the Bible and is the true key to understanding it. This Gospel is *the only* Gospel. The heart of the Gospel is that the holy, loving and only Son of God, Jesus, while confronted with human hostility and rebellion, lived a sinless life and died a bloody death to be our Savior, Lord and Redeemer and to reconcile us with God. Through it we have peace with God and have eternal life with Him. And that's good news indeed!

R. C. Sproul writes: *The Gospel is called the "good news" because it addresses the most serious problem that you and I have as human beings, and that problem is simply this: God is holy and He is just, and I'm not. And at the end of my life, I'm going to stand before a just and holy God, and I'll be judged either on the basis of my own righteousness—or lack of it—or the righteousness of another. The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus lived a life of perfect righteousness, of perfect obedience to God, not for His own well being but for His people. He has done for me what I couldn't possibly do for myself. But not only has He lived that life of perfect obedience, He offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice to satisfy the justice and the righteousness of God.*

But, there is a serious problem—a very serious problem. Ever since the unveiling of this Gospel in the first century AD, man, with the help of religious leaders, has either watered it down or added to it thereby making it "*a different gospel-- which is really no gospel at all*" as stated by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians.

There are many in the Christian community who have been deceived by religious doctrines—*a works and deeds based way to salvation*— or by feel-good sentiments such as—*God is love and would never send anyone to hell who means well and tries hard to be good*—or by a new age philosophy that is *doesn't matter what you believe but rather just that you are sincere in your beliefs*. The implications of the following foreboding statements in the Bible, including one from Jesus Himself, should give us cause for concern.

You probably are familiar with the loving and comforting words of John 3:16—*For God so loved the world*—but those welcome words of God's love are followed by those in 3:18 that are ominous in their implication:

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

Consider what are perhaps the most foreboding words from the mouth of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew 7:21-23, when Jesus was cautioning his followers to "*watch out for false prophets.*" He said:

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

He was talking to religious followers who called Him "*Lord, Lord*" and who preached God's Word and did many other religious good deeds, yet He tells them plainly, *'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'*

Why? Because, they were teaching “*a different gospel-- which is really no gospel at all*”

Read carefully and be aware of the foreboding statement that Paul made in his letter to the Galatians:

Galatians 1:8-9 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel-- which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

Read that again. Those are very powerful and ominous words. *“If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!”*

Here is the point. The Gospel of salvation was clearly that which Paul was referring to. Correct? He was speaking in the first century. Correct? So, then the Gospel today must be the same as the Gospel that Paul was referring to in the first century and not a 21st century version. Right? So any additions, deletions, or any other modification of that first century Gospel, even if given to us by any religious leader or even by an angel from heaven is a perversion of the Gospel. Right? And a perversion of the Gospel is “*another Gospel which is really no Gospel at all.*” Right? And that person, according to Paul, should be “*eternally condemned.*” Right?

Every Christian should be profoundly concerned for the perversion of the Gospel of salvation. The point is this. **The Gospel of salvation was given to the disciples of Jesus to spread throughout the world in the first century AD. Therefore, whatever was the Gospel in the first century Church is the Gospel today.** God has not changed it, but, regrettably, religions have. The adding to or watering down the Gospel, surprisingly started with the religious leaders in the first century.

Jude’s brief letter in the Bible addresses specific concerns about false teachers who were modifying the Gospel and were threatening the churches in the first century. In his letter he wanted to make clear that the Gospel was once for all time. He urged the believers to defend the truth of the Gospel when he wrote:

*Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for **the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.** For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord. Jude 1: 3-4*

James, the son of Joseph and half-brother of Jesus, also known as “James the Just” wrote his new testament letter in about **AD 47** to first century Jewish Christians to correct “easy-believe-ism,” the kind of superficial belief in Christ that is mere intellectual assent—the attitude that turns faith into cold orthodoxy, with the person merely believing the right facts about God and Jesus. James explained it this way: “*Do you still think it’s enough just to believe that there is one God? Well, even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror!*” James 2:19.

Obviously, demons aren’t Christians, and yet in one respect they are “believers.” Their kind of belief is far from the faith that saves. To deal with this problem of watering down the Gospel head-on, James pronounced that superficial faith, just believing the facts about Christ, is not enough. True faith involves wholehearted and genuine trust in Jesus Christ and will be evidenced by a changed life. In other words, true faith will produce good works. The good works do not save but are evidence of a true faith that does save.

Further, in **AD 49**, Paul wrote a letter to the church in Galatia. He was steaming angry at how the church leaders there were telling the new Gentile converts that there was more they had to do beyond placing their faith and trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior in order to be saved. Even the Apostle Peter received the rebuke of Paul for how he was condoning these perversions of the Gospel. Here is what Luke wrote that led up to that rebuke:

Some men (including Peter) came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." (Luke writing in Acts 15:1)

Paul writing in Galatians 2:11-21 When Peter came to Antioch, I (Paul) opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. ¹² Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. ¹³ The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. ¹⁴ When I saw that **they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel**, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? ¹⁵ "We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' ¹⁶ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified. ²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

This led to the calling of the first church council in Jerusalem to settle the matter.

Luke writing in Acts 15:2-3 This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. The church (in Galatia) sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad.

AD 49: The Council at Jerusalem: The First Ecumenical Church Council with James, the half brother of Jesus presiding

Luke writing in Acts 15:4 When they came to Jerusalem; they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the **believers** who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."

Luke writing in Acts 15:6-11 The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

The First Church Council confirmed that salvation is by faith alone, not by works so no one can boast..

The point is that modifying—adding to or deleting from—the first century Gospel is a very serious matter—very serious as made absolutely clear in the scripture passages above. It was attempted by the religious leaders in the first century, even by Peter and other believers, and it has been pervasive in the Christian Church ever since. For example, additional requirements for salvation include such things as the required performance of certain "works" that one must do in addition to that which Jesus has done through His sinless life, bloody atoning death, and confirming resurrection from the dead.

The inclusion of *works* added to the Gospel come from such things as church dogmas or traditions that modify the Word of God and state that a person is to be eternally condemned unless one adds works to faith, or adds obeying Church or denominational doctrines (law) to faith; or accepts other books or traditions as more fully explaining the Gospel; or must believe and obey compulsory authority granted to persons with ecclesiastical titles. *Works* such as these make the first century Gospel "a different gospel-- which is really no gospel at all"

These *works* supposedly allocate merit to us that we need to get into heaven. They might include acts like ministering to the sick, or the giving money to the church, or receiving certain sacraments, or attending certain church services. Or *works* might include obedience to church laws, such as not eating certain foods on certain days, or not dancing. *Works* could even include obeying the Law, the Ten

Commandments, as a condition for salvation, as if one could lose their salvation by not obeying them perfectly.

Not so. The Law was not given to us to show us a way to earn our salvation, but to show us our inability to keep it and therefore our need for someone to save us—namely Jesus. Paul, in his letter to the church in Galatia made this point. He wrote:

What, then, was the purpose of the law? So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.

(Paul writing in Galatians 3:19 and 24)

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse. Galatians 3:10

If works were an additional requirement for salvation, one would have something to boast about. But, Paul made it perfectly clear that we are saved by grace (that is God's unmerited favor) through faith apart from the law so we have nothing we can boast about. Paul wrote to the Church at Ephesus:

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— **not by works, so that no one can boast.*** (Paul writing in Ephesians 2: 8, 9)

True saving faith will produce good works but good works do not save—they are evidence of a true faith that does save. Paul in his letter to the Romans: 3:28 wrote: ***For we maintain that a man is justified (saved) by faith apart from observing the law.***

Paul also wrote: ***“Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised*** (or add good works or obeying the law to faith alone as a condition for salvation) ***Christ will be of no value to you at all.**”* (Paul writing in Galatians 5:2)

Cults do rely heavily on works as the way to salvation. Religious cults hold to the Bible as the Word of God but have auxiliary books that are held in higher esteem and are supposedly needed to explain the content of the Bible. Some even claim the mantle of *Christian*, such as Mormons with the book of Mormon; the Jehovah's Witnesses with their own version of the Bible, the New World Translation plus Watchtower

publications; and Christian Scientists with their Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures.

Doctrine does divide. We do not want to bring about further divisions in the Church. But, there are certain doctrines that are non-negotiable. The Gospel of salvation is the central doctrine to Christianity. It is non-negotiable. God is intolerant of *a different Gospel*.

So, where, exactly, do we find the true content of the Gospel that Paul is referring to? The answer must be, in the first century when he made that statement. Right? So, let's look to Paul and other first century contemporaries of Paul for the answer. Make sense?

The Gospel in the First Century and Today

First, a little background: the bad news:

Adam was the perfect representative of mankind. He did not have a *sin nature* — that is, he could freely choose without being encumbered with a desire to sin. But when Adam disobeyed God, sin entered the world and since then Adam's sin nature has been inherited by everyone. When Adam disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1-7), he brought spiritual death upon himself and his descendants — all of mankind, for all time. **Therefore, each of us is born a sinner, unable to understand spiritual truths because we are dead in our sins.** We are not sinners *because* we sin. Rather, we sin *because we are sinners* — sinners condemned to death.

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.

(Paul writing in Romans 5:12)

You were dead in your transgressions and sins.

(Paul writing in Ephesians 2:1)

*There is **no one** righteous, **not even one**; there is **no one** who understands, **no one** who seeks God.* (Paul writing in Romans 3:10, 11)

When we tell you this, we do not use words of human wisdom. We speak words given to us by the Spirit, using the Spirit's words to explain spiritual

truths. But people who aren't Christians can't understand these truths from God's Spirit. It all sounds foolish to them because only those who have the Spirit can understand what the Spirit means.

(Paul writing in 1 Corinthians 2:13-14)

*And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that **they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ**, who is the image of God.*

(Paul writing in 2 Corinthians 4:3-4)

Now, The Good News—The Gospel

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

God demonstrates His own love for us in this; While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Paul writing in Romans 5:8)

But God, in His mercy, gives some spiritual life, regenerating them. He opens their hearts — gives life to those He chooses so that they can understand spiritual truths that they could not before.

*You were **dead** because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. **Then God made you alive with Christ.** (Paul writing in Colossians. 2:13)*

*You used to live just like the rest of the world, full of sin, obeying Satan, the mighty prince of the power of the air. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. All of us used to live that way, following the passions and desires of our evil nature. **We were born with an evil nature, and we were under God's anger just like everyone else. But God** is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so very much, **that even while we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead.** (Paul writing in Ephesians 2:2-5)*

*One of them was Lydia from Thyatira, a merchant of expensive purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. As she listened to us, the Lord **opened her heart**, and she accepted what Paul was saying. (Luke writing in Acts 16:14)*

Once we understand spiritual truth, we have the ability to acknowledge our sinfulness — and seek forgiveness from God. Then, when we

acknowledge to God that we are sinners and we confess our sins and seek His forgiveness, God forgives us and purifies us from all unrighteousness.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.

(Paul writing in Romans 4:7-8)

And when we confess Jesus as our Lord and Savior and ask Him to come into our life, He will do so and we will have a spiritual birth — be born again — of salvation.

That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in you heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

(Paul writing in Romans 10:9)

I tell you the truth; whoever hears my Word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. (John 5:24)

We are saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone and by Christ alone.

*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified **freely** by His grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

(Paul writing in Romans 3:23, 24)

For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. (Paul writing in Romans 3:28)

*But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by **grace** you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms **in Christ Jesus**, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by **grace** you have been saved, **through faith** – and this not from yourselves, **it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.**" (Paul writing in Ephesians 2:4-9)*

I tell you the truth, he who believes has eternal life. (John 6:47)

*But now you have been set free from sin and have become enslaved to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, **but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.** (Paul writing in Romans 8:22, 23)*

That's the Gospel! Nothing more need be added. We were dead in our sins — God made us alive so we could understand spiritual truths, God gave us the free gift of grace to acknowledge our sinfulness, and the free gift of faith to confess Him as Lord and Savior, and He gave us eternal life. So, now we have peace with God through Jesus Christ.

That's it! The Gospel.

*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, **we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ**, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. (Paul writing in Romans 5:1, 2)*

He brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved. (Luke writing in Acts 16:30-31)

And those who have truly repented of their sins, and truly invited Jesus into their lives as both their Lord and Savior will never lose their salvation — they have peace with God through Jesus Christ.

And this is the testimony; God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:11-13)

You were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. In Him, when you believed, you were marked with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession. (Paul in Ephesians 1:13, 14)

There are no works, no good deeds, **nothing** we must do or that need be added—not now or in the future.

*Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, **to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.** (Paul writing in Romans 4:4, 5)*

That's the Gospel — nothing more needs to be added or deleted — and there is **only one way** — **the way, Jesus**. There is no other way of salvation — no other Savior. Religions claim to show a way **to** salvation, but Jesus is the only way **of** salvation. There is a profound and fundamental difference between the ways that religions tell us to seek salvation and the way described in the gospel of Jesus. The point is that all religions teach a **way to salvation** but only Jesus claimed to actually **be the way of salvation** Himself. Our **eternal security** — that is, our assurance that we will spend eternity with God in heaven despite our sinfulness — is found in justification **by faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone**.

Jesus answered, 'I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.' (John 14:6)

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. (John 3:18)

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." (Luke writing in Acts 4:12)

Timothy Keller, in his book *The Reason For God*, further emphasizes the difference between religion and Christianity. He writes: "There is, then, a great gulf between the understanding that God accepts us because of our efforts and the understanding that God accepts us because of what Jesus has done. Religion operates on the principle 'I obey—therefore I am accepted by God.' But the operating principle of the Gospel is 'I am accepted by God through what Christ has done—therefore I obey.' Two people living their lives on the basis of these two different principles may sit next to each other in the church pew. They both pray, give money generously, and are loyal and faithful to their family and church, trying to live decent lives. However, they do so out of two radically different motivations, in two radically different spiritual identities, and the result is two radically different kinds of lives.

Keller continues, *“The primary difference is that of motivation. In religion, we try to obey the divine standards out of fear. We believe that if we don’t obey we are going to lose God’s blessing in this world and the next. In the Gospel, the motivation is one of gratitude for the blessing we have already received because of Christ. While the moralist is forced into obedience, motivated by fear of rejection, a Christian rushes into obedience, motivated by a desire to please and resemble the One Who gave His life for us.”*

In conclusion and on a personal note, I am a “teacher” of the Word of God and I am profoundly aware that as such I “will be judged more strictly.” Therefore, I take very seriously that which I represent God’s inerrant Word says, especially about eternal salvation. My heart aches for those among us who have been taught a very religious perversion of the Gospel of salvation. I shutter at the words of Jesus when He said plainly to religious teachers of a false Gospel, *‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’*

The great misconception in our day is that God is a kind of feel-good and tolerant deity, who just waves a wand of forgiveness over everybody. Not so. God is intolerant. He gave the sacrifice of His only Son, Jesus, to pay a very costly price to provide salvation. So valuable was that sacrifice that God pronounced it valuable by raising Him from the dead—Christ died for us and was raised for our justification (salvation). The Gospel is something objective. It is the message of who Jesus is and what He did. The Bible makes it clear that we are justified not by our works, not by our efforts, not by our deeds, but by faith—and by faith alone. The only way one can receive the benefit of Christ’s life and death is by putting one’s trust in Him—and in Him alone. When one does that, he or she is declared just by God, adopted into His family, forgiven of all sins, and has (present tense) eternal life.

Man seems to have a pent up need to get some credit along the way for something he has done to earn, at least in part, his own salvation. But God has done it all. He gives us a Free Gift—His Son Jesus Christ as *the way* to the Father and heaven, with no stops in a purgatory or anywhere else. Man wants to shape God into Who he wants God to be and not accept the God of the Bible. Man wants God to be love without justice—to judge with warm feelings and not with truth—and to make truth subjective—whatever man wants it to be. But God is Who He is described as being in the Bible, and man must deal with that.

God has made it very clear that He will never share such “credit” with anyone else.

“I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols. (Isaiah 42:8)

Are these straightforward words from Jesus tolerant or intolerant?

“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’ (Mt.10: 34f)

The very nature of Jesus’ claims forces people to make a choice. They must choose to believe who He said He is, or they must choose to reject Him. Jesus did not come to bring **peace** but a **sword** (that is, division) that separates families, friends, and nations. He is intolerant to tolerance of any other way. Conflict and disagreement will arise between those who choose to follow Christ and those who do not.

Often, for the sake of tolerance and to not upset someone, we practice peace at any price and allow loved ones and friends to go through life accepting another Gospel, *which is really no Gospel at all*. They believe they are saved and going to heaven, but the fact is they are going to be *eternally condemned*. As followers of Christ, it is our role and calling to *make disciples* by sharing the Gospel of salvation. With love, we must bring what the true Gospel is and is not to the attention of those persuaded otherwise by religious trappings and appearances.

This whole subject of the Gospel of salvation has been on my heart for sometime and I would be derelict if I did not deliver this message as broadly as I can, especially to those who believe they are Christians but have been taught a false yet religious Gospel, *which is really no Gospel at all*. The ramifications are the most significant things we have to face in our entire lifetime. It is a matter of eternal life or death.

God loves us and has provided His Son Jesus as *“the way, the truth and the life”* to His Father—heaven—our salvation. Not *a way* but *the way*, the one and only way. **Accept no other Gospel and give God all the glory for our salvation. END.**