Galatians 1:3-4 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. He gave himself for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.

If you have ever been in one of my Bible classes where we are beginning the study of one of the Epistles of Paul you have heard me talk about importance of the grace and peace that these letters usually start with. In truth, I can talk about God’s grace for probably 10 minutes before I have to take a breath and the same is true when I speak of the peace of God. It is God’s grace that brings us this peace and please note, as is so evident even in our text’s opening verses, all of this is based on Jesus.

Did you note what important aspect of Jesus is the heart and core of this grace and peace? Seriously, first verse and you find grace, peace, Jesus, God the Father and the fact that Jesus is raised from the dead. That’s because the resurrection of Jesus is the heart and core of our faith. There is no grace if Jesus is not raised. There is no peace if Jesus remains in the grave. Make sure you grasp this, if a church teaches anything short of the actual and physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead, that church has abandoned the truth and wonder of the Gospel message of Jesus.

How important is it that you keep before you the truth and wonder of Jesus? Not long ago I had a conversation with someone on the importance of making sure your church was teaching the truth of God’s Word. Because time and time again, God’s Word warns us of false teachers and false prophets who will abandon the truth, twist the Gospel and lead souls away from Jesus. It can all be very subtle. What did Jesus tell us in Matthew 7? He gave us this warning: **“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves…Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and drive out demons in your name and perform many miracles in your name?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers.”**

Our text is important then, because here is Paul, God’s apostle, writing by verbal inspiration to a group of Christians and it is clear that the warning Jesus gave is very much a concern of Paul for the souls he was writing to. It is a text that will help us learn how to gauge what is right and what is wrong when it comes to measuring ministry. Our theme will be: **THE GOSPEL OF JESUS.**

One of the things that does impress as you begin to read this section of God’s Word is how the opening verses, yes, the first four verses already clearly lay out the point and purpose of Jesus and his gospel. The first three verses point out that everything is about Jesus, the risen Jesus and his Father. It is through Jesus and the Father that apostles were chosen, Gospel words and history were written, that the grace and peace of God is being proclaimed to the glory of God.

What I love most is the simple but pointed words of verse 4. It is highlighting the wonder of Jesus. What does it say? **“He gave himself for our sins to rescue us.”** That’s what Jesus is about. Jesus is our Savior. Jesus came to pay for our sins. Now to do that Jesus first had to prove he was the perfect Son of God. For 30 plus years Jesus lived his life, confronted every temptation you and I face and yet Jesus did so without sin. All of this qualified Jesus to then begin his earthly ministry, a ministry that was going to completely fulfill all of the Law of God. Not just that Jesus was holy and perfect, but that Jesus was going to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins and the sins of the whole world. That’s what the ceremonial part of the Law was about. It was about Jesus and what He would do. Make no mistake, the message of our salvation, from the very beginning of God’s Word is the message of a Savior who would atone for us and bring us life and salvation. That’s what Jesus is about.

There is the first important thing to know about measuring ministry today. Is the message you are hearing one of Jesus as your Savior? Is it a message where the horror of sin, our sins, is pointed to and the wonder of Jesus paying for our sins is highlighted? Is it a message of how God has done and accomplished all things in Jesus, for you? Is it a message of God’s grace and peace, the grace and peace that is found in what Jesus has done? Such simple but far reaching words when we read: **“He gave himself for our sins to rescue us.”**

But beware. There are plenty of churches out there that teach about Jesus. They teach morality based on Jesus or they teach how to live and act, how to really be a follower of Jesus. There is a difference between teaching about Jesus and teaching Jesus. Teaching about Jesus stresses Jesus in you and how you can be different because of Jesus. It will stress living this way or being that. When you teach Jesus, it is about what Jesus has done for you. How Jesus died and rose for your salvation. How Jesus has done all things necessary for our forgiveness and eternal life. The emphasis is on Jesus and his atonement not Jesus and how you live.

Do recognize that the problem we are speaking of, this problem of teaching falsely, was very much a concern even in the days of the Apostles. Listen to what Paul writes immediately after he has given a statement on the purpose and wonder of Jesus. He says, **“6I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ, for a different gospel, 7which is really not another gospel at all. There are, however, some who are trying to disturb you by perverting the gospel of Christ. 8But even if we or an angel from heaven would preach any gospel other than the one we preached to you—a curse on him! 9As we have said before, so I now say again: If anyone preaches to you any gospel other than the one you received—a curse on him!”**

Wow! He says, “**A curse on him!”** Those are strong words. Why? The key words of what was going on were evident. There are those preaching **“a different gospel, which is really not another gospel at all…or…perverting the gospel.”** In other words, the message of Jesus is being changed, altered in some way, some fashion so that it really is not the truth and wonder of the gospel at all.

Let’s just speak of some of the ways this gospel of Jesus is perverted and made different in today’s world. Take the church that simply teaches that God is love and from there God will pretty much tolerate everything and anything because he is nothing but love. Then why this warning to stick to the truth? Why this message of rescue?

How about churches that rely on means and method to get people into church. They might work at ways to make church emotional, something that tweaks and moves you, something that will cause you to walk out and say, “Wow, I really feel good about myself now.” Maybe it was the “praise band” (and I ask if such is really worship?) or those who lead in singing (why do they seem more like performers and stars, than leaders in worship?) or the fact that you were lead to believe that today the Holy Spirit really filled you up and made you feel special. Seriously, what is the gimmick they use to get you in church? Why can’t they just preach Christ and him crucified, risen and ascended to heaven for our eternal salvation? Because that is boring stuff, they say. They know the world is hostile to and opposed to the truth of Jesus. No, we need in the church exciting things to draw in the world but in truth, those who use such things do not have confidence of the power of God’s Word alone to save. It is a different gospel.

And when you hear sermon after sermon on do this and be that, is that the Gospel of Jesus? Seriously, I just went to the website of a popular church in our extended area and here were some of the sermon topics that were posted: *The Image of God: Exploration of Biblical Humanity, Spiritual Leadership, Drift: Reigniting a Passion for God, Life Worth Living, Fresh Start: Experiencing Change through Grace, and Unhappily Ever After? Redeeming Marriage with Grace.* Now, I have not had time to read or watch these sermons yet, but the titles alone and what I saw on the website leads me to be pretty sure these sermons do not focus on Jesus and what He is about but rather on how your life can be better if you would just follow Jesus. That is not the gospel of Jesus.

Well, Pastor, what’s wrong with trying to please people and get them in your church? What did our text say? Again remember this is in conjunction with the warning not to have a different Gospel? **“Am I now seeking the favor of people or of God? Or am I striving to please people? If I were still trying to gain the approval of people, I would not be a servant of Christ.”** In light of those words, when the church of Jesus is using gimmicks to lure people in, when we work hard at programs to help people like the church and join, who are you serving? It saddens me tremendously when I see our WELS Lutheran churches, Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Methodist and the like, all using the same kinds of programs to lure people in. Churches have been doing this for over 40 years and still Christianity in the USA is declining. Me, I say, “Hey, how about preaching the message of Jesus and not worrying about the results. Jesus is the one who will determine what will grow and what will not. We sow the seed, the seed of the gospel and He grants the harvest. What is wrong with us when are throwing out seed that isn’t even the gospel to begin?

I could go on and on. The problem with Churches is that we not teaching and preaching Jesus anymore. We have abandoned the truth of sin. Many churches don’t even teach Adam and Eve as real people who did the first sin. In other words, they deny this God given history and yet they claim they are going to teach you that Jesus saves?

That is the point of the Church, Jesus saves! It is not about what you can do or what you feel or even what you experience. It is about what Jesus has done and is still doing in our world today. But in order for people to learn of Jesus, we need to teach the Gospel, the pure and wonderful message of God concerning his Son and our eternal salvation through Him.

Here is what is important to know. There is sin. It is a destructive force in this world that causes people to be enemies of God, dead in trespass and sin. Look at that history of the fall of Adam and Eve and pay attention to what happens once they eat of the fruit. God does not change at all, but Adam and Eve now run and hide from him, afraid of him and defiant toward Him. Such is what sin has done and is in our lives. We are sinners. Those who are dead in sin and trespass and on our own we have no care or concern for what is of God or the truth of God.

But God promised a Savior. God working in history revealed that Savior, and caused it, so that when the time was right that Savior was born. Even in his coming into this world the process of fulfilling all that God’s Word declared the Savior would be was begun. Born a descendant of David in Bethlehem. Born of a virgin. Born the light of the world and the Bread of Life as the Law proclaimed.

This Jesus, again in fulfillment of God’s will and word, showed himself to be the Savior. He began a three year ministry filled with truth, wisdom, the clear revelation of God’s Word and miracles. Remember the miracles were just done so that there would be ample proof of his divinity. Even the Jewish leadership who hated Jesus couldn’t deny the miracles but blamed the work of the devil for them.

And then Jesus went to the cross. His Passion, which we are not that far from having celebrated is such a total wonder. Jesus dying for us. Jesus paying for our sins. Jesus crying out, “**Father, forgive them they don’t know what they are doing.”** But more important, Jesus crying out, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** Even more important than that Jesus proclaiming to us: **“It is finished.”** He has done what he came to do. He came to die for our sins and to rescue us from what that sin has brought.

There it is. There He is. Jesus the Savior. The one who died and then rose from the dead that we might have eternal life and salvation. He is our hope. He is our strength. He is the very point and purpose of God’s grace. Because grace says that what we fully and truly deserve, God took out on Jesus. The hell that should be ours, Jesus took just because He loved us. And Jesus lives. In Jesus we have peace, true peace in knowing that sin is forgiven and heaven is our home. There is no fear of death. There is no fear of hell. There is only the promise of God that in Jesus heaven is my home now and for all eternity! And with Jesus’ ascension into heaven, He and the Father send the Holy Spirit….to lead us to Jesus and his awesome redemption! Saved! Saved by Jesus! That’s what our faith is about. That’s what the Gospel is about!

I pray our church, your church always loudly and boldly proclaims Jesus and his gospel. Amen.