

The Book of Galatians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 3: Recognized by the Apostles

Galatians 2:1–10

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This passage records a decisive moment for the unity and the purity of the gospel. Paul recounts how, in Jerusalem, the leading apostles examined the gospel he preached among the Gentiles and recognized it as the same gospel they preached, adding nothing to it. The flashpoint was Titus, a Gentile believer whom certain false brothers wanted circumcised as a condition of full acceptance. Paul refused, because to require the works of the law alongside faith in Christ would have surrendered the truth of the gospel. The doctrinal stakes are the freedom of the gospel from law as a ground of justification, and the unity of the one apostolic message.

Two cautions will help the teacher here. First, the freedom Paul defends is freedom from the law of Moses as a system of justification, not freedom from the obedience of faith. Circumcision was the badge of the old covenant; refusing to require it is not the same as refusing what God has appointed under the new covenant, such as baptism into Christ. Second, Paul's firmness is in the service of love, not the enemy of it, which is why the passage ends with eagerness to remember the poor.

So the lesson aims at both conviction and character. Help students treasure the unity and purity of the one gospel, and give them courage to protect it under pressure. At the same time, form in them the very combination Paul models, a heart that holds truth firmly and opens its hands generously, refusing the false choice between sound doctrine and active love.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul went up to Jerusalem "by revelation" and set before the leaders the gospel he preached, "in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain" (2:1–2). Why did Paul seek this recognition, and what does the leaders' response reveal about the unity and the single source of the apostolic gospel?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul tells us he went up to Jerusalem "by revelation," not summoned by the leaders as a subordinate, and that he laid out the gospel he had been preaching among the Gentiles. His stated concern was that he might be "running in vain," not because he doubted his message, which came from Christ, but because the practical unity of the church mattered. A divided witness, with one gospel for Jews and another for Gentiles, would have crippled the mission.

The outcome settled the matter. The leaders examined Paul's gospel and "added nothing." There were not two gospels but one, independently received by Paul and yet identical to the message of the Jerusalem apostles. This is the same point Paul made about his conversion in chapter one, now confirmed in a public meeting. The unity was real and visible.

Help students see what this teaches about the gospel's single source. If a message given directly to Paul by revelation matches the message given to Peter, James, and John, the simplest explanation is that one Lord gave it to them all. The harmony of the apostolic witness is not an accident of agreement but the fingerprint of its divine origin.

Draw out the encouragement. We stand on a gospel that has been tested and confirmed, not a private theory. The faith once for all delivered to the saints is the same faith across the apostles and across the centuries, which is why we can hold it with confidence.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The unity of the one apostolic gospel across all the apostles
- The single divine source behind the harmony of the apostolic witness
- Paul's authority as independent yet fully recognized
- The value of visible unity for the church's mission

Discussion Prompts

- Why did the practical unity of the church matter so much to Paul?
- What does the agreement of the apostles suggest about the gospel's source?
- How does a confirmed, unified gospel give us confidence today?

Question 2

Student Question:

Titus, a Greek believer, "was not forced to be circumcised" (2:3), a living test case for the freedom of the gospel. Where do you feel pressure today to add cultural expectations or man-made requirements to what it means to truly follow Jesus?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Titus becomes the test case. He was a Gentile believer, uncircumcised, standing in a room where many felt he ought to submit to the law of Moses. Paul reports, with evident satisfaction, that he "was not forced to be circumcised." The principle was at stake in this one young man: is a person made acceptable to God by faith in Christ, or by faith plus the badges of the old covenant?

This is a self-examining question, so help students bring the principle home. The specific demand was circumcision, but the underlying pressure, to add cultural or man-made requirements to the simple gospel, is perennial. Every generation has its unwritten rules about

what a real Christian must look like, sound like, dress like, or belong to, beyond what Christ requires.

Invite discernment, not cynicism. Not every expectation is wrong; the church has genuine standards drawn from Scripture. The danger is when human preferences and cultural markers get elevated to the level of the gospel, so that people feel they must clear our extra hurdles to be fully accepted. Help students notice where they may be imposing or submitting to such hurdles.

Point back to the freedom Christ purchased. We are accepted in the Beloved, not in our conformity to a subculture. Holding that truth frees us both from the pride of looking down on those who differ and from the anxiety of measuring up to standards God never set.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Acceptance with God through faith in Christ, not through cultural or ritual badges
- The perennial temptation to add man-made requirements to the gospel
- Discernment between genuine biblical standards and mere human preference
- Freedom from both pride and anxiety in our acceptance before God

Discussion Prompts

- What unwritten rules can a church use to measure who is a real Christian?
- How do we tell a biblical standard from a mere cultural preference?
- Where do you feel pressure to clear extra hurdles to be accepted?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul says “false brothers” were “secretly brought in,” who “slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery” (2:4). What is this freedom in Christ, and why did Paul regard the demand to add law-keeping as a return to slavery?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul uses sharp language: “false brothers secretly brought in,” who “slipped in to spy out our freedom.” Their aim was “to bring us into slavery.” Notice that Paul frames the choice not as freedom versus discipline but as freedom versus slavery. To go back under the law as a way of being justified is, in Paul’s vocabulary, to return to bondage.

Define the freedom carefully. It is freedom from the law of Moses as a system that must be kept perfectly to earn standing with God, freedom from the endless burden of self-justification, freedom to come to God on the basis of Christ’s finished work. It is not freedom to sin, which Paul will rule out plainly in chapter five. It is the liberty of a child welcomed home, not the license of a rebel.

Explain why the demand for circumcision amounted to slavery. The moment law-keeping becomes the ground of acceptance, a person is back on a treadmill that never stops, always needing to do more, never sure of having done enough. Grace ends the treadmill. To trade grace for law is to climb back onto it voluntarily, which is why Paul calls it a return to chains.

Help students feel the contrast in their own experience. Many believers live with a low-grade slavery of trying to earn what God has already freely given. The gospel invites them to step off the treadmill and rest in the freedom Christ secured.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Freedom in Christ as liberation from the law as a system of justification
- Legalism as a return to slavery and self-justification
- Gospel freedom distinguished from license to sin (Galatians 5:13)
- The rest of grace over against the treadmill of earning

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul call a return to law-keeping a return to slavery?
- How is gospel freedom different from freedom to do whatever we want?
- Where do you still live on the treadmill of trying to earn God's favor?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul “did not yield in submission even for a moment” (2:5). Where in your own life do you need backbone to hold to the truth when the pressure to go along, keep the peace, or fit in is strong?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns Paul's courage into a mirror. He “did not yield in submission even for a moment,” and the phrase is striking. Not a day, not an hour, not a single concession. He understood that some compromises are not small, because they touch the heart of the gospel, and that a little surrender at the center can undo everything.

Help students locate the places in their lives that call for this kind of backbone. The pressure we face is usually not from enemies but from the desire to keep the peace, to avoid awkwardness, to fit in with respected people. It takes real courage to hold a conviction when the cost is social discomfort rather than open persecution.

Add wisdom alongside courage. Not every hill is worth dying on, and Paul elsewhere yields gladly on matters of preference and conscience for the sake of others. The skill is discerning what is central and unyielding from what is secondary and flexible. On the truth of the gospel, no compromise; on matters indifferent, much patience.

Encourage them with the source of such courage. Paul could stand firm because his standing was already secure in Christ. When our acceptance does not depend on the approval of the room, we are free to be faithful in it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Courage to refuse compromise on the central truths of the gospel
- Wisdom to distinguish central matters from matters of preference
- The fear of man, including the desire to keep peace, as a pressure toward compromise
- Security in Christ as the root of courage before people

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you need backbone to hold a conviction under social pressure?
- How do you tell a gospel hill from a hill not worth dying on?
- How does security in Christ free you to be faithful in a hard room?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul reports that those who seemed influential “added nothing to me” (2:6). What does it mean that the gospel needs no human additions, and how does this confirm that we are accepted by grace and not by supplementing Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul notes, almost dryly, that the most influential leaders “added nothing to me.” The gospel he preached needed no supplement, no improvement, no extra requirement bolted on. This small phrase carries large freight: the gospel of grace is complete in itself, and any attempt to add to it implies that Christ’s work was insufficient.

Help students feel the logic. If we must add our law-keeping, our rituals, or our merits to Christ in order to be accepted, then Christ alone did not save us; we finished the job. The gospel will not allow that. We are justified by grace, received through faith, and nothing we contribute completes a work that was already finished at the cross.

Guard against the misunderstanding that this makes obedience optional. The point is not that obedience does not matter but that it is not the ground of our acceptance. We obey from acceptance, not for it. The new covenant calls for a living, obedient faith, yet that obedience rests upon grace rather than earning it.

Bring it to rest in assurance. Because the gospel needs no human additions, the believer can stop trying to top up an account that Christ has already filled. Our confidence is in his sufficiency, not in our supplements.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The completeness and sufficiency of the gospel of grace
- Justification by grace through faith, with nothing added to Christ's work
- Obedience as the fruit of acceptance, not its ground
- Assurance grounded in Christ's sufficiency rather than our merit

Discussion Prompts

- What does it imply about Christ if we must add our works to be accepted?
- How do we obey from acceptance rather than for it?
- Where are you tempted to top up an account Christ has already filled?

Question 6

Student Question:

The leaders recognized that God was at work through Paul among the Gentiles just as through Peter among the Jews. Whose ministry or gifts have you been slow to recognize or affirm, and how might you encourage a fellow worker in Christ this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question lifts our eyes to the way the leaders recognized one another's work. They saw that God was powerfully at work through Paul among the Gentiles, just as through Peter among the Jews, and they rejoiced in it rather than resenting it. Recognition of another's ministry is a grace many of us are slow to give.

Help students examine their own slowness here. We can be quick to notice the flaws in a fellow worker and slow to celebrate the good God is doing through them, especially if their gifts differ from ours or their success exceeds ours. The leaders in Jerusalem model a better way: they discerned the hand of God and gave thanks.

Make it practical and immediate. Encouragement that stays in the heart helps no one. Invite students to think of one person whose service they have undervalued and to plan a concrete word of affirmation this week, a note, a conversation, a public word of thanks.

Tie it to the body of Christ. In a body, the eye does not begrudge the hand its usefulness. Recognizing and affirming one another's gifts is how the church grows up into Christ, with each part doing its work.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Recognizing and affirming the diverse ministries God gives in the church
- Gratitude rather than rivalry over another's gifts and fruitfulness
- The body of Christ as interdependent, each part valued

- Encouragement as a concrete, intentional practice

Discussion Prompts

- Whose ministry have you been slow to recognize or affirm?
- What makes us reluctant to celebrate gifts different from our own?
- Who can you encourage with a concrete word this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

James, Cephas, and John gave Paul and Barnabas “the right hand of fellowship,” recognizing different fields of labor in the one gospel (2:7–9). What does this teach about genuine unity in the church, a unity that holds one gospel together with a variety of ministries?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The right hand of fellowship is a beautiful image. James, Cephas, and John, reputed pillars, extended their hands to Paul and Barnabas, formally recognizing a shared gospel and distinct fields of labor, Paul to the Gentiles and Peter to the Jews. Here is unity that is neither uniformity nor competition. One gospel, many laborers, different assignments, deep fellowship.

Help students grasp this model of church unity. The unity Scripture commends is not everyone doing the same thing or thinking alike on every detail. It is a shared commitment to the one gospel and the one Lord, expressing itself in varied ministries that complement rather than rival one another (1 Corinthians 12:4–7; Ephesians 4:1–6).

Note that this unity has a doctrinal center. The pillars did not extend fellowship to just anyone; they extended it to those who preached the same gospel. Unity is grounded in shared truth, not mere sentiment. We are one because we hold one gospel, not because we have agreed to ignore the truth.

Apply it to congregational life. A healthy church makes room for many kinds of service, honors different callings, and refuses turf wars, all while standing together on the apostolic gospel. The right hand of fellowship is extended around shared truth and shared mission.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Biblical unity as shared truth expressed through diverse ministries
- Fellowship grounded in the one gospel, not in sentiment alone
- Complementary, not competing, callings within the one body
- The doctrinal center of genuine Christian fellowship

Discussion Prompts

- How is biblical unity different from uniformity?
- Why must true fellowship be grounded in shared gospel truth?
- How can a congregation honor many callings without rivalry?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul and Barnabas worked alongside other servants without rivalry or turf wars. Where are you tempted toward comparison, competition, or jealousy in serving God, and what would it look like to labor with others rather than against them?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses on the tendency toward comparison that lurks in service. Paul and Barnabas labored alongside the Jerusalem apostles without jockeying for position. In a kingdom where the last are first and greatness means servanthood, rivalry among workers is a contradiction, yet it is one we fall into easily.

Help students name the forms comparison takes: envy of another's visibility or results, the quiet keeping of score, the deflation we feel when someone else is praised. These impulses turn fellow servants into competitors and rob us of joy in the work God has actually given us.

Offer the gospel cure. When our worth is settled in Christ, we no longer need to win the comparison game, because our value was never up for grabs. We can celebrate another's fruitfulness because the kingdom's gain is our gain, and the field belongs to the Lord, not to us.

Move toward a concrete shift. Encourage each student to identify one relationship where comparison has crept in and to replace rivalry with partnership, perhaps by praying for that person's success or joining their work rather than competing with it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Servanthood and humility over rivalry in kingdom work
- Comparison and envy as thieves of joy and unity
- Worth settled in Christ as the cure for competition
- Partnership in the gospel rather than turf-keeping

Discussion Prompts

- Where does comparison or competition creep into your service?
- How does your worth in Christ free you from keeping score?
- What relationship could you turn from rivalry to partnership?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul stood firm “so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you” (2:5), refusing to let circumcision and the works of the law be added to faith in Christ as the ground of acceptance with God. How do we preserve the truth of the gospel in our own day, holding firmly to the God-given response of faith, repentance, confession, and baptism, without either adding human conditions or subtracting what God has appointed?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the lesson. Paul stood firm “so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.” The truth in question was that we are justified by grace through faith in Christ, not by adding the works of the law. To require circumcision and law-keeping as the ground of acceptance would not have refined the gospel; it would have replaced it. Paul guarded the center because everything depends on it.

Help the teacher frame the issue precisely. The works Paul excludes are the works of the Mosaic law performed to earn a standing before God and to boast in. He is not excluding the response of faith that God himself commands. This distinction matters enormously, because the danger runs in two directions. One error adds human conditions to the gospel, as the Judaizers did. The opposite error subtracts what God has actually appointed, reducing the gospel to a bare mental assent, a faith only that never obeys.

Spell out how we preserve the truth of the gospel today. We hold to the God-given response Scripture describes: hearing the gospel, believing in Jesus as Lord and Christ, repenting of sin, confessing him, and being baptized into him for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27). None of these are works of the law by which we boast, and none of them are human additions; they are the obedience of faith that God appointed. Baptism is not the badge of the old covenant like circumcision but the appointed point at which we are clothed with Christ. To preserve the gospel is to keep this whole picture intact, neither piling on extra human requirements nor cutting away what God has commanded.

Equip the teacher to answer the obvious objection. Someone may ask, if we are saved by grace and not by works, how can baptism or repentance be necessary? The answer is that grace is the source and faith is the means, and the obedient response of faith is how we receive the gift, not how we earn it. A beggar who opens his hand to receive bread has not earned the bread. Faith that believes, repents, confesses, and is baptized is the open hand of the beggar, not the wage of a worker.

End by holding truth and love together, as Paul does. We preserve the gospel not to win arguments but because souls are at stake and because the gospel is the only thing that truly sets people free. Guarding it is an act of love for the people who will live or die by it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Justification by grace through faith, not by the works of the law (Galatians 2:16)
- The works of the law as Mosaic law-keeping done to earn and to boast, not the obedience of faith
- Preserving the gospel by neither adding human conditions nor subtracting God's appointed response
- The God-given plan: hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, and being baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4)
- Baptism as the appointed reception of Christ, not a meritorious work or an old-covenant badge
- Faith and its obedient response as the open hand that receives grace, not a wage that earns it
- Guarding the gospel as an act of love, because souls and freedom are at stake

Discussion Prompts

- What exactly was the truth of the gospel that Paul refused to surrender?
- How do we avoid both adding to the gospel and subtracting from it?
- How would you answer someone who says baptism must be a work that earns salvation?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole passage. Paul held the truth with an iron grip and held the poor with an open hand. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you to be both more faithful to the truth and more generous in love at the same time.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone draws together the two threads the lesson has woven: unyielding truth and open-handed love. Paul would not give an inch on the gospel, and in the same breath he was eager to remember the poor. In him, doctrine and compassion were not rivals but partners, each one keeping the other honest.

Help students feel the danger of separating them. Truth without love can curdle into harsh, argumentative religion that wins points and loses people. Love without truth can dissolve into a sentimental kindness that has nothing solid to offer the suffering. The gospel produces both, a firm hold on what is true and a generous reach toward those in need.

Press for one specific step. Ask each student to name a single way Jesus is calling them to grow in both directions at once, perhaps to study and hold the truth more carefully while also opening their hands more freely to someone who is hurting or poor. The two can grow together, in the same week, in the same heart.

Close in worship of the Christ who embodies both. He is full of grace and truth, the One who never bent the truth and never turned away the needy. To be formed into his likeness is to become, like Paul, a person of firm convictions and open hands.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The unity of truth and love in the Christian life
- The distortions of truth without love and love without truth
- Christ as full of grace and truth, the pattern for his people
- Spiritual formation as growth in conviction and compassion together

Discussion Prompts

- Which do you find harder, holding truth firmly or loving generously?
- What happens to faith when truth and love are torn apart?
- What is one way you can grow in both this week?