In simplified form, cancer requires three things to become dangerous and destructive. **First,** you must have a mutated cell — a cell that was originally designed for one purpose, but now has been corrupted. This happens all the time in everyone’s body and our immune system is tasked with getting rid of those so they don’t hurt us. **Second,** that mutated cell must be able to reproduce and multiply. That is a lot less frequent as most mutations lead to corrupt cells that can’t reproduce. Without the ability to multiply, a single cancer cell can’t hurt us. **Third,** this mutated, multiplying cell must not look bad to our immune system — our white blood cells must not see them as a danger or sick or mutated, but a normal, friendly, helpful cell. All three of these must be true for any cancer to personally become destructive in our bodies.

Today we are going to look into false beliefs or false gospels. Like cancer cells they can become truly destructive to our own lives and the family & local church we belong to. Historically, the church has spoken about this in terms of “apostasy” — where a person believes and holds to the Biblical faith, but then turns to something very different. While you rarely hear the word today, it is one of the most serious problems spoken about in both the Old & New Testament. Similar to cancer it actually requires three things to become a danger to ourselves and others. **First,** it needs a distortion of God’s truth — a corruption of the powerful Word of God or grace of God in the gospel. Like cancer cells, that is happening all the time around us. And it was all around the early Christians as one person has figured there were like 127 different religions in the Roman World at the time of Jesus. Don’t let the number of false claims about faith, Jesus or different belief systems un-nerve you — it is these next two sections that make or break false teaching, just like cancer. **Second,** that distorted truth has to then find some fertile ground in the life of a person or group so it can multiply. Often this comes from some inner trouble — like a personal crisis, hardship, tragedy, or loss. It can also come when we want something more than we want God & His truth. In other words, when Jesus is not enough, when we have false expectations, when we are not content or when we hold on to something as more important than the Lord, then that person or group becomes fertile ground for deception. **Third,** we must perceive this twisted, distorted, or false teaching as something good & helpful rather than a problem. If all three of these are in place, then that faulty belief can multiply unchallenged in our lives until we turn away from the Jesus of the Bible & core truth of the gospel to apostasy and following false truth.

**Why is this so important?** Because the gospel of Jesus Christ is given to us to bring life, open heaven, establish a right relationship with God, forgive our sins, transform our character, direct our path and give us eternal life. To turn from this or to follow other ways will result in disaster. We will lose out on all of those. So the question we were given for today from one of those here at BEFC was …

Question submitted: “**Talk about the false gospels of our day, especially the idea that the gospel can be reduced to improvements in behavior.**”
PROPOSITION: Because there will always be false gospels in the church & world around us, it is essential that we recognize and don't give ground to them in our own life and local church.

I. The true gospel (Gospel = ‘good news’)  
This brings us to the book of Galatians where the apostle Paul speaks forcefully about the problems of false gospels in the early church.

A. The importance of the gospel

READ Gal 1:6-9. These are some pretty strong words – some of the strongest in the New Testament. There is a true gospel – it is of Christ, it was preached by Paul & his missionary team and it was accepted by the Galatians. The true gospel centers on Jesus Christ, who was bodily raised from the dead after He died on the cross for our sins, so we could be rescued from this present evil age. There are also false gospels, which are perverted versions of the true gospel. These are not good news as they throw people into confusion and cause people to desert the true God & His ways. May God curse them, Paul says in no uncertain terms. This is just as dramatic as Jesus overturning the tables of the merchants & money changers in the temple because of their materialism.

What you may not have noticed in our scripture reading earlier in the worship service is that there are no words or praise for the faith, hope or love of the Galatians. Normally Paul’s letters have some kind of commendation after the letter’s introduction and greetings. Even in the letters to the Corinthians, who were engaged in so many moral and relational corruptions, there were some good words said about them at the beginning of those letters. But there are none here in the letter to the Galatians. So important is the truth of the gospel that it overshadows everything else. Notice in verse 6 that they have deserted the true God. READ v 6. In other languages that term “deserted” could be stated as “abandoning”, “leaving to the side,” or “going off and forgetting”. The word carries with it the idea of changing one’s mind by willfully forsaking one’s former loyalty and adopting a different loyalty.

This is not just a sin, but it is deserting the true God ("the one who called you" in verse 6). It is leaving the grace of God (verse 6). It is being confused about God and His ways (verse 7), and it is perverting Jesus Christ’s good news (verse 7). Turning to a false gospel is SO SERIOUS that even IF the apostle Paul himself or other highly regarded Christian teacher or even an angel from heaven should preach a gospel different than the true one, that person should be under God’s curse. READ v 8. Only the worst of the worst are under the curse of God. To make sure no one misses the incredible importance of holding on to the true gospel, we read the same thought again in verse 9. READ. Outside of denying Christ, little else is spoken of this severely. Teaching or holding on to false doctrine in the core of our beliefs is devastating.

B. The content of the gospel (good news)  

(I Cor 15:1-11)
So what is the gospel or good news of Jesus? What is the content of the gospel? This passage in Galatians 1 focuses on the importance of the gospel more than on the content. The content of the gospel is more clearly stated in I Corinthians 15:1-11 so you can check my comments with that passage later today. But the CONTENT of the gospel – the core of the GOOD NEWS is reflected in this passage. Let’s describe that gospel or good news, in a different way than we normally outline it.

1. What do we receive? 
   Gal 1:1,2,4,6
   Any good news will ALWAYS include something we receive that will counter some bad news or problem we face. **So what do we receive from Jesus through the gospel?** The clues given here in the beginning of Galatians 1 are that the good news comes from God (v 1), has Jesus as our Messiah (v 1 & 3), involves Jesus’ bodily resurrection from the dead (v 1). That true gospel relationally connects us to other followers of Jesus (v 2). Jesus’ death deals with our sins (v 4) and rescues us from the present evil age (v 4). It is according to the plan and desire of God (v 4). And that gospel is offered to us as a gift in the grace of Christ (v 6) and there are many counterfeits which throw people into confusion (v 7). The NT is full of what good things we receive through the gospel. The gospel is given to us to bring new life, open heaven, establish a right relationship with God, forgive our sins, be transformed, direct our path and give us eternal life. You can see why the literal meaning of Gospel is “good news”.

2. How is this made possible? 
   Gal 1:1,4,6
   The second part of any good news is the question, **how is it made possible.** I may bring you “good news” that you will be healed physically or be given a million dollars in the next 24 hours, but that isn’t good news if I can’t deliver. All the benefits God offers us in the gospel of Jesus have a cost to them that God bears. **SO how is our forgiveness, salvation, transformation, reconciliation and solid hope made possible?** Because Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah (v 1). Jesus is God the Son come down in human form to show us God’s way more clearly. He died on the cross to pay the penalty of our sins (v 4) and rose bodily to prove it (v 1). This is something only the God/man can do because He alone was sinless and He alone is God who is the one wronged by our sin. As v 6 tells us, this isn’t anything we can do for ourselves, but it is something God did and offers to us as a free gift by His grace. So our gospel, or “good news”, centers around Jesus and what He has done. Get either of those basic truths wrong and it is no longer good news – it is a false gospel.

3. What do we need to do or how we are to respond? 
   Gal 1:6,7,9-10
   The third part of any “good news” is how are we to respond or what are we to do so it remains “good news”. Every large lottery winner thought it was good news at first, but within 5 years the majority of large lottery winners say their life has become worse. Our passage also reminds us that while salvation is a gift from the grace of God, we need to live in that grace and not desert the One True God.
as v 6 says. We are not to pervert or change that good news as v 7 says. And we are not to encourage others to follow false gospels as v 9-10 says. Elsewhere in the New Testament it is clear we are called to respond to God’s offer of forgiveness, restoration and future glory through Jesus by repenting of our sins, believing in the Jesus Christ alone, loving God and others, worshipping the Lord, sacrificing self, learning and obeying God’s word. These are responses to the gospel – they are not ways to earn forgiveness or heaven.

II. False Gospels in NT times and today

   Gal 1:6-9

   So then what will false gospels be? READ v 6-7a and 8-9. It is the same now as back in NT times.

   A. Alter what is the ‘good news’

   It would be a false gospel if we alter what the ‘good news’ is. Let’s say you make the ‘good news’ that all Christians can expect to be healed of all their pain and problems now in this earthly life if they have enough faith. The true gospel says we will be healed of our sickness, raised from the dead and live in a world that isn’t broken – but that is in the future. In CS Lewis imagery, to insist on that now is to be so short sided and to be content playing in a mud puddle when a beautiful ocean or lake beach is just down the road. False gospels have faulty or temporary goals.

   B. Alter what is necessary for God to accomplish that ‘good news’

   It would be a false gospel if we alter what is necessary to accomplish the ‘good news’. So when we say salvation comes from our being good or trying harder or acting nicer, we are saying, all that is necessary is our effort, possibly with a little help from God. That focus is again so limited – it is just dealing with a couple of sins instead of dealing with the deeper and bigger problem of sin itself – in nature, in the spirit world around us and the brokenness in human cultures. We absolutely want to cooperate with God and put effort into overcoming our individual sins – but if that is the top way of accomplishing God’s goals, it would be as worthless as dusting a cabinet when your house is burning down. We are powerless to be saved from the consequences of our sin or our deep sin nature. We cannot destroy the evil spiritual forces around us. And we definitely can’t undo all the effects of sin on the physical world around us. Our problem is not just that people aren’t nice enough to each other!

   C. Alter how we are to respond or what we need to do

   Which leads to the final category – we can pervert the true gospel by altering how God has called us to respond or what God has asked us to do. In the case of the Galatians, they wanted to add doing old religious rituals to earn God’s forgiveness and salvation. In the case of the Corinthians, they thought it was fine to disobey God’s sexual morals because salvation is just by grace and God just wants us to accept everyone. In the case of the Gnostics which I John speaks against, they thought it was fine to do anything since the body is bad – all that was important is secret knowledge. Notice that all these alterations take a positive item of the gospel and just push it too far. They twist that clear truth so it no longer is what God actually says.
III. Some popular ‘false gospels’ today

So what are some popular ‘false Christian gospels’ today.

A. Promising some aspect of “heaven on earth” now

By far, the false Christian gospel that is multiplying the most, and doing the most damage in the whole world like cancer does to the body – are those gospels that promise some aspect of “heaven on earth now.” We have the prosperity gospel – that financial blessings are always the will of God for Christians now – all you have to do is have positive thoughts and give to their ministry. We have the health gospel – that every Christian is meant to be totally healthy now in this life with no physical problems and all you need to do is have the right faith. We have the easy life gospel – where God, as Father, wants His children to have everything they want – an easy life and everything working out. Those aren’t the gospel because they twist what God promised and they are the opposite of how Jesus & the disciples lived! Don’t let the promises that you can have “heaven now” deceive you – God promised heaven for heaven. Notice while these types of false gospels were around the first 300 years of the church, they didn’t multiply much because to become a Christian at that time generally meant you were going to be spoken negatively, have more problems in society, not have as much monetarily and even face the loss of family, friends, jobs, houses, health or your physical life. Remember the key to defeating false doctrines is NOT by trying to force each individual one out but by taking away their ability to multiply without resistance. That starts with recognizing their danger.

B. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD)

The one that impacts our question today the most (“Talk about the false gospels of our day, especially the idea that the gospel can be reduced to improvements in behavior.”) – this was renamed in 2005. That year, sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton released a book called Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers. The book was the result of a research project called the "National Study of Youth and Religion" where 3,000 Americans teens were personally interviewed about their faith and beliefs. In their book, Smith and Denton coined the term moralistic therapeutic deism to describe the “defacto dominate religion among contemporary teenagers.” So if you are around 24-32 years of age, it is your generation that was being interviewed. They found that that generation of teens believed 5 major things spiritually …

1. A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and most other world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.
To put a label on this amalgamation of beliefs they choose three words – **Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.** **Moralistic** – focusing on God wanting people to behave – improvements in behavior. **Therapeutic** – because their belief was more "about providing therapeutic benefits to its adherent" as opposed to things like "repentance from sin, keeping the Sabbath, living as a servant of a sovereign divine, steadfastly saying one's prayers, faithfully observing high holy days, building character through suffering, etc...." depending on the faith background. And they choose **deistic** to define a "belief in a particular kind of God: one who exists, created the world, and defines our general moral order, but not one who is particularly personally involved in one's affairs—especially affairs in which one would prefer not to have God involved." In other words, there is a God who made the world, but then basically leaves it alone unless someone needs Him. It views God as "something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: he's always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process." This deism is very different than the classic eighteenth-century version as the therapeutic qualifier, makes this distant God selectively available for taking care of needs. So salvation, joy, paradise, lasting marriages, transforming love, hope, the destruction of evil, the transformation of nature will all come by us just trying a little harder to be nice. In America, this Moralistic Therapeutic Deism affects most of the faiths – so the false **Christian gospel** in this area would be called **Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.**

Listen to these words from an article on CNN about that book’s findings as applied to American Christians. "The problem does not seem to be that churches are teaching young people badly, but that we are doing an exceedingly good job of teaching youth what we really believe, namely, that Christianity is not a big deal, that God requires little, and the church is a helpful social institution filled with nice people...."

Notice the perverting or changing. This view of the problem and salvation is so small. In reality we need to be saved from so much more than a bad action or upset attitude. We need to be saved from all the warfare in the world, all the sickness, disease & death in the world, all the natural disasters in the world, all the evil spiritual forces around us, all the injustice done in the world. God does want to transform our characters to be more Christ-like – and He wants us to put effort into that. God does want us to experience joy, contentment and peace even in this broken world. But the idea that Jesus died just so we could be a little better and more well-adjusted is so pathetically small. It is like being content on putting a little bandage on a person dying from stage 4 cancer! Or thinking vitamin C will solve all their problems. God's plan is so much bigger and grander than more behaved and well-adjusted people. The good news is that God wants to utterly transform us, renew nature and remove the effects of the curse, completely stop all the evil spiritual & human forces around us as well as that sin nature deep inside all of us. Morals only go after the behavior – they will
always be undone in time because of the strong influences of the world, the flesh and the devil.

C. New form of universalism
D. Legalism

I delusionally thought I would have enough time for two more as in every century there is some form of universalism and legalism that tempts people with false good news. Our popular form of universalism today is different than in the 1800’s but it is the same at the core – everyone, or virtually everyone, goes to heaven regardless because God is love. The tempting form of legalism today entices people who are opposed to spiritual laxness, want to do something immediately about moral decay and want to counter universalism because it gives a list of behaviors that supposedly will stop the growth of these harmful happenings.

False gospels – false offers of good news – are always around us. Trying to put up artificial walls so you or your family is never exposed to them actually weakens our ability to be victorious over them and in time, produces its own false gospel in our lives. Key in tackling false gospels is not by trying to identify each one, but by knowing and experiencing the true gospel’s grace & power so much that everything else seems out of place and not nearly as good for the long run. Are we content with what Jesus has, is and will do in our lives? That is the overcoming attitude the Holy Spirit is seeking to build in each of our lives.