

C Ordinary 12  
2013 June 23  
Galatians 3:3-14, 23-28  
"The Curse of the Law"

Little Johnny and his family were having Sunday dinner at his Grandmother's house. Everyone was seated around the table as the food was being served. When Little Johnny received his plate, he started eating right away. "Johnny! Please wait until we say our prayer." said his mother. "I don't need to," the boy replied. "Of course, you do" his mother insisted. We always say a prayer before eating at our house." "That's at our house." Johnny explained. "But this is Grandma's house and she knows how to cook."

Over the past few weeks our readings from the New Testament letters have come from Paul's Letter to the Galatians. It's not very long: only six chapters, and they are short chapters. Perhaps you remember when we read the opening verses in chapter 1. They are actually pretty easy to remember, even if not word for word.

Paul writes, beginning in chapter one, verse 6, I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel. There are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

Paul is on a tirade, but as it turns out, it is a justifiable tirade. The primary theme of Galatians jumps out at the reader almost right away. As you can gather from the verses above, there are some folks there who are preaching a gospel different from the one that Paul had delivered to them some number of years before the letter was composed, when he passed through the region and established the church in Galatia. By the way, the Roman province of Galatia was located right in the middle of the region we know today as the nation of Turkey.

What is the different gospel that these teachers are preaching? It is a gospel that requires adherence to the Jewish law, the Torah, in order for one to become a legitimate follower of Jesus. In particular, these teachers are saying that every non-Jewish male must be circumcised before he can be considered a true Jesus follower. While circumcision seems to be the primary issue, the new teachers were also probably preaching that the Galatians must adhere to at least some of the dietary restrictions of the law, as well.

Paul, on the other hand, has preached a gospel of liberation in Christ, a gospel that sets the Gentiles, that is, the non-Jews, free from the restrictions of the Torah. Most scholars think Galatians was composed about the year 55 AD. By this time the church

has incorporated a great many Gentiles in every part of the Mediterranean basin except in the traditional homeland of the Jews.

As you read Galatians and others of the New Testament letters, as well as the Book of Acts, it becomes clear right away that the integration of Gentiles into the new tradition based on the teachings of Jesus was difficult, painful, and slow. There were many issues and questions to be resolved, and one of the most vexing of those issues was exactly this one: Did a Gentile convert have to live according to the ancient law of Moses in order to follow Jesus? Was adherence to the law a prerequisite for membership in the body of Christ? The new teachers who had followed behind Paul on his journey through Galatia say yes. Paul says no. And not just no, but emphatically no.

Paul spends a good part of the first two chapters of the letter establishing his credentials as a trustworthy and faithful expositor of the gospel of Christ. For the reasons that he sets out there, he tries to convince the Galatians, the gospel that he preaches is the true gospel of Jesus, while these interlopers are preaching a false gospel.

So with that introduction we come to today's reading. "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you! Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by believing what you heard?" You can almost taste the anger and indignation boiling underneath these words.

At this point, verse 6 in chapter 3, Paul reminds his readers of Abraham, who (quote) "believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." That is, the LORD recognized Abraham as righteous because of his faith, not because of anything that he did. Paul will develop this theme of the righteousness of Abraham at greater length in the following chapter, but the main idea is introduced here.

Those who believe, those who trust in Christ, are the true descendants of Abraham, not those who do the works of the law. Paul reminds his readers of the several places in the Hebrew scriptures where the LORD says to Abraham that the Gentiles will be blessed through him and his descendants. And so that has come to pass. The Gentiles are now blessed by the redemption, hope and joy which are theirs in Christ.

Then comes a most amazing statement from a former Pharisee. Paul writes, "For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse." Stop and think about that for a moment. In his letter to the Philippians Paul reminds them that he was at one time "blameless under the law." Immediately after that he says that he counts all of that as rubbish because of (quote) "the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ as [his] Lord."

Here in the Galatian letter Paul writes that all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse. That is, quite simply, amazing. Something has happened to Paul. What has happened to him, of course, is Jesus.

Paul quotes Habbakuk, the second chapter: “The one who is righteous will live by faith.” Which means, of course, not by rigid adherence to the law.

Paul writes, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us,” that is, by taking on himself the awful burden of our sin.

Then we read, beginning in verse 23, we were once imprisoned and guarded under the law. The law was intended to keep us in line until Christ came. But now he has come. We are no longer subject to the law, even though the law continues to act as a guide. For, he writes, “in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.” When the Galatians were baptized into Christ, they clothed themselves with Christ, as one might put on a baptismal robe.

So the Galatians are no longer subject to the law. One consequence of this new reality in Christ is that the division that the law produced, between the people of God, the Jews, and everyone else, the Gentiles, is now gone. Paul writes, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Now the people of God are all those who trust and follow Christ.

So what are we to make of this? We live in an entirely different time, in an entirely different culture. Because we are the descendants of generations of Gentiles, we don't worry too much about being subject to the ancient law of Moses, although we most certainly recognize the value in many of those stipulations as guides for faith and practice.

What is “the curse of the law” for us 21<sup>st</sup> century Christ-followers, living in the United States of America? In this letter Paul is deeply concerned about the inclinations of the Galatians to bind themselves in slavery to the law, when in reality they have been set free in Christ. That is the message for us, too.

We have been liberated by the love of God in Christ. The message for us is that we must be available and open to the whisperings of the Holy Spirit in our corporate lives as the Community Presbyterian Church of Cedar City. In all things we can and must seek the will of God for us. No one will ever claim that discerning that will is an easy thing. But that is why we are here.

We must be aware of the ways we can also fall into slavery to anything other than Jesus the Messiah, and boy, we can find a lot of ways to do that. The law for us will be any traditions or practices that prevent us from first being the people of God, and then doing the work of the people of God. We must be always cognizant, in other words, of the prevailing power of the last seven words of the church: “We've never done it that way before.” The law for us? A grip on traditions and practices that we must abandon in order to be faithful to our calling in Christ.

Finally, for us as well, “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.” That means, first of all, that we are one in this particular body of Christ which we call Community Presbyterian Church. Even when we disagree on particular issues, we are one because we all belong to Christ. We must not lose sight of that.

And second, we are one with Jesus followers wherever they may be throughout the world. The oneness of Christ extends beyond the walls of our building and spills into our town, our state, our nation, and this world that God has created. In spite of our human inclinations to create denominations and divisions, the unity of Christ cannot be thwarted. We are bound to one another by the love of Jesus, and by our love for Jesus.

Next week you will hear a part of the fifth chapter of this Galatian letter. It begins like this: “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

That guy Paul knew how to write.

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