

**Background**

**Last week I introduced Paul's letter to the Galatians by telling you that Paul had not been one of the original apostles of Jesus, but a persecutor of Christians. But his dramatic conversion and meeting with the risen Jesus propelled him into a great ministry for Christ. Paul was accepted by the original apostles: Peter, James, John, and others; and they had agreed that he would take the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 15). Included in this agreement was an understanding that Gentile converts to the Christian faith need not follow the ritual law of Judaism, such as eating only kosher foods and being circumcised.**

**This letter is not written, as most of St. Paul's are, to the Christians of a particular city, but to those of a whole country in Asia Minor, the metropolis of which was Ancyra. These readily embraced the gospel; but, after St. Paul had left them, certain men came among them, who (like those mentioned, Acts 15:1.) taught that it was necessary to be circumcised, and to keep the Mosaic law. They affirmed, that all the other apostles taught thus; that St. Paul was inferior to them; and that even he sometimes practiced and recommended the law, though at other times he opposed it.<sup>1</sup>**

**In defending himself and what he preached Paul wrote, "I want you to know brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ."**

**Paul's relations with the Galatians were particularly strained because they were divided among themselves as to the truth of the gospel. The Jewish Christians were reverting to their Jewish dietary and purification laws and as a result they would not sit at table with the Gentile Christians. This divided the church. To make matters worse, at Antioch Peter gave in to peer pressure, and separated himself at mealtime to sit with the Jewish believers at their table, apart from the Gentiles.**

**Paul maintained that if Peter and the Jewish Christians insist on observance of the Law of Moses (in this case meal fellowship and dietary laws) as necessary for the people of God, then they are really nullifying the grace of God and making Christ's death meaningless. God has chosen to set things right in the world through the cross and through raising up a new people in which the old barrier between Jew and Gentile is not relevant. The cross nullifies the need for the ceremonial and dietary laws and all distinctions by which we set ourselves apart from one another. When Peter refuses to eat with the Gentile believers, he is living as though the cross were of no avail. Paul insists that those who have been crucified with Christ will gather around one table.**

---

<sup>1</sup>John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, "Notes On St Paul's Epistle To The Galatians."

**It may have been that the apostles (all Jewish) had accepted Paul's ministry to the Gentiles without thinking that they would in any way "compromise" their Jewish identity. It was okay to preach Jesus to the Gentiles; but to change their customs in order to have table fellowship with Gentiles, was another thing altogether. The Jewish Christians separated themselves because they believed they were acting in obedience to the revealed Law of God. If they shared meals with Gentile converts wouldn't it lead to compromising the distinctive identity of God's people?**

**Paul understood that if the separation went on it would lead to the formation of two permanently separated churches, divided along ethnic lines. Inevitably this division would imply the superiority and greater purity of the Jewish-Christian church; and Gentile believers would always be step-children in the family of God.**

**Paul sets out to clarify what is at stake in this disagreement about observing the Jewish laws, himself having once been a champion of "Jewish-ness." In effect he says, "Let's clear the air here."**

**First of all: Who sets things right?<sup>2</sup> God makes his people right by coming to their rescue and instituting right order in a world gone wrong. This assumes that the Galatians (and we) understand that humans need to be made right with God, because our sinful state makes it impossible to measure up to God's standards of living and morality without some outside intervention. Those who are "rectified" are made the people of God because of God's action to make them so. This status of belonging to the people of God, this status of being "saved," has nothing to do with observing the Law, and everything to do with the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Only God can set things right and God has chose to do so through the death of Jesus rather than through the Law of Moses.**

**"It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn?" (Rom. 8:33b-34a). Because we are made right by God's boundless grace in Jesus, we can let go of our anxious need to make things come out right or our need to insure the "purity" of the church. Yes, there are expectations that those who have received this great grace will gratefully live as those "being saved," but we realize that God is making us new and so we cannot forcibly set all things and all people right in the present. It's like that old saying that Jesus sends us out as fishers of men and women saying, "You catch 'em; I'll clean 'em."**

**What role has Jesus played in setting things right? We are not made right with God or saved by the strength or purity of our own believing – that would just be a new kind of work or law to follow, and one very hard to measure. We are made right only through the faithfulness of Jesus; meaning His act of love and self-giving on the cross for our sake. His death on the cross is his act of**

---

<sup>2</sup> The following thoughts taken from: Richard B. Hays, "The Letter to the Galatians," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol.XI, Leander Keck, Ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 236-248.

**complete trust in God, who raises the dead to life (Rom. 4:17), and, God's act of faithfulness toward humans who need to be rescued from the grasp of sin and death. "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). The righteousness of God is that God is faithful to his own love for humans, which endures – "God is good, all the time; all the time, God is good." Christ's death has not only proved God's love and given us forgiveness of sin, it also created a new world in which we are restored to God's grace and liberated from the bondage of powers that once ruled our lives.**

**What is the nature of the new life that the death and resurrection of Jesus have inaugurated? Paul speaks of his own experience in this new creation; an experience that is open to you and me. He has entered into union with Christ's death in such a way that he can make the remarkable statement, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." The individuality remains, but the mainspring, the ruling disposition, is radically altered.**

**Christians, down through the ages, have found in Paul's words an apt description of the transformation of the very core self that takes place when they are identified with Christ. "I have been crucified with Christ," says Paul. He does not say, "I have determined to imitate Jesus," or, "I will try to follow Him," but "I have been identified with Him in His death." The spiritual need here is to sign the death warrant of the disposition to sin, which is rooted in my claim to my right to myself. When I come to such a moral decision and act upon it, then all that Christ wrought *for me* on the Cross is wrought *in me*. The free commitment of myself to God gives the Holy Spirit the chance to impart to me the holiness of Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>**

**It is more than a matter of having his sins forgiven (Paul never mentions forgiveness in this letter); rather it is a matter of being transformed for service. To his own surprise Paul finds himself on a completely new path in life, becoming the instrument of Christ's reconciling and redeeming love, to those Gentiles whom he previously regarded as unclean "dogs." Who knows what God could do with you?**

**We're not talking here about a momentary mystical "high," but the ongoing experience of living in the power of mighty God, who loves us and gave himself for us. John Wesley discovered this, was transformed, and began a life-long witness and reformation of his own soul (see the movie tonight). With Christ in charge Wesley found himself stepping out of his prim and proper upbringing to bring the good news of Jesus to miners, workers, and roughnecks. Because of God's faithfulness Paul leaves behind the securities of the Law and ethnic identity (found in kosher foods, circumcision, and rituals of purification); and is**

---

<sup>3</sup>Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, "Interest or Identification, March 21<sup>st</sup>," (Oswald Chambers Publications Assoc., 1963).

freed to proclaim God's great grace and even share food with those whose way of life he once found unclean.

Brockton, Massachusetts, "The City of Champions." The sign refers to an earlier period in the city's history when it proudly boasted boxing champions Rocky Marciano and Marvin Hagler as favorite native sons.

Brockton is the home base for "My Brother's Keeper" a service organization which aides the poor, distressed, and marginalized in society. "My Brothers Keeper" is a champion not so much for what it does, although that is significant and noteworthy in itself, but *how* it performs its ministry. "My Brother's Keeper" delivers furniture, household items, and food in the name of Christ. When a delivery is made the individual or family serviced receives a crucifix. The volunteer presents the crucifix and says, "This is the man who gave you the furniture. We are only the delivery people." We too can be the delivery people of Christ's grace.

How is the truth of the gospel embodied in social practices? The truth of the gospel can be betrayed by false doctrine *and* false practices. Paul opposed those missionaries for spreading false doctrine that the Gentiles had to conform to Jews custom to be Christians, *and* he opposed Peter for false practice of separating himself from Gentile converts at meal time.

The Jewish Christians who met with Peter at Antioch (and may have been the missionaries who went to Galatia) were not passing legislation to restrict the activity of Gentiles; they were merely withdrawing into private groups for their meals and worship. But their action raised questions that impinged upon their very identity as Christians. Would they all gather at one table for meals and fellowship, as brothers and sisters in Christ, or would they keep two different tables, so that the Jewish Christians could separate themselves and maintain their Jewish cultural identity? Was there to be one church or two "separate but equal" churches?

The longer the congregation has been in existence, the more difficult it is for that congregation to integrate new members; that is, unless, the congregation recognizes their situation and makes great strides to bring in new people. The reason this is so is simply human nature. After a group of people have become comfortable with one another they develop their way of relating, and tend to attract people like themselves. A church can become entrenched in its way of telling the story of God's action through Jesus Christ. They can even form a kind of "culture" which is unspoken and understood only to themselves. But to outsiders it appears impenetrable. I sometimes think this has become the case for Methodism.

In a large congregation people tend to cluster with folks they already know. Classes or small groups can unintentionally focus inward. I am challenged as pastor to understand and welcome folks unlike myself. It seems that as we age we get more comfortable in the way we're used to doing things, expressing our

**faith, or looking at God's actions among us, and we can be uncomfortable when someone (younger) comes along with a different experience. There is that tendency within to want to insist that they have the same experience as me, go through the same steps I've gone through, and express their faith in Christ in the same manner. I confess that I don't find my daughter's taste in Christian music quite as compelling as my own. But then I realize that our tastes in music do not unite us; Christ's sacrifice for us does.**

**We naturally separate ourselves by culture, language, national origin, worship style and preference (or a host of other things we can devise). But it is so marvelous how Christ can bring us together. When I meet a Christian from another country, and know that he/she is passionate about Christ in his/her life, I get all enthused. Then language, style of dress, preferences in worship, all become secondary to the transforming power of Jesus Christ.**

**Christians who cross cultural boundaries to do the work of God in ways they had not anticipated are the ones who most often explain what they are doing with Paul's words, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." We don't have to leave our community, let alone our country, to cross cultural boundaries. We don't have to leave home to let Christ take charge of our lives.**

\*\*\*\*\*

The language of righteousness in Galatians.

Greek	English (Latin root)	English (Anglo-Saxon root)
δικαιοω	justify	rectify
δικαιος	just	righteous
δικαιοσύνη	justice	righteousness or rectification

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has brought into being a new people – no longer Jew nor Gentile (and as he says in Ephesians neither male nor female, free nor slave) but all one in Christ. This is not an inference from the gospel but integral to the gospel itself.