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The Letter to the Galatians—Fall 2013 Shared Ministry Study
Session 3 (Galatians 3:1-29)—September 24, 2013

Galatians 3:1-5—Bewitched

It can't be both. It just can't. Paul has brought us this far in the first two chapters of his letter—laying down the gauntlet that the Gospel is either **Jesus-Alone** (we are made right with God by trusting in the free gift of what *Jesus* did, no fine print), or it is settling for some counterfeit that turns out to be **Jesus-Plus-Something** (we are made right with God by our keeping of covenant requirements alongside of believing in Jesus). Paul has tried to show us from his lived experience and the wrestling of the early church leaders that if we are going to really say we believe it is **Jesus-Alone**, then we have to let that news percolate through all of our thinking and actions, and we can't start making distinctions between insiders and outsiders, or what additional ritual actions have to happen to get “in” to the club (*in the first century, the question was about circumcision for Gentile converts, but it could just as easily be debates about how much water a person has to be baptized with, or how old they can be when they are*). Now, Paul appeals to the actual lived experience of the Galatians themselves. He simply asks them to remember what happened to them, and how they came to experience the Spirit of God. Was it when they had been circumcised? Was it the moment they kept all the commandments? Was it some occasion when they prayed in a certain formula or gave a certain offering? Or was it at the point of trusting the Good News? Paul seems to think the Galatians will at least remember their own experience accurately, and realize that they saw the power of God in action, along with people being healed, and the weak made strong, and the broken made whole, *when all they had was faith*. Nothing more had been done. Paul says that their own experience testifies to the fact that it was never about rule-keeping or rituals. The Galatians haven't been remembering their own stories rightly. Or, maybe, Paul suggests jokingly, someone has cast a spell on them so that they can't see what has been in front of them all along: the love of a God who never made that love dependent on their permanent record.

Galatians 3:6-9—How You Tell the Story

What would make for a knockout argument here? If Paul could show us that even the quintessential Israelite was made right with God as a gift of grace by faith rather than by his religious works. You know, a test case—but not just anybody, someone who could be a stand-in for both Jews and Gentiles. Aha—Abraham! He was viewed as both the ancestor of all of Israel (*and thus he is the prototype of all Jews*) and the classic example of a Gentile (*because he was worshiping pagan gods when YHWH got his attention and sent him to Canaan on a wing and a promise*). However *Abraham* was established in right relationship with God, then, can be the pattern for the rest of us, whether Jews *or* Gentiles, insiders *or* outsiders! So Paul just recounts the story for us—as Genesis 15:6 says it clearly, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” The commandment of circumcision doesn't even come for another two chapters in Genesis! Aha, Paul says—there's proof right there. Abraham was counted as being right with God, simply by trusting God's freely given promise, before he could do a thing! And since God's promise included blessing for “all the families of the earth,” that includes Gentiles, too! Case closed!

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- What are some strengths of looking at our own religious/spiritual experience to arrive at truth? What are some of the dangers if we *only* appeal to our experience? How does Paul deal with that danger?
- Why does it matter *how* we tell the stories of people who are examples of the faith for us, like Abraham?

Galatians 3:10-14—Absorbing the Poison

Paul's next move is brilliant. He has made a strong argument for how *Abraham*, the quintessential Jew, was actually justified (made right with) by faith in God's gracious promise, and so he has made a positive case for why non-Jews can be made right with God apart from keeping the Jewish Law. But now he comes back on the other side and pushes us to see the consequences of trying to be justified based on our commandment-keeping. The lynchpin for his argument is the quotation of the Law itself that Paul uses in 3:10, "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law." In other words, the Torah itself laid down an absolute standard and insisted that you had to keep the *whole* thing in order to be blameless. You couldn't just keep 95% of the Law and expect an "A" in the class, or shoot for a percentage in the mid-sixties and plan on coasting into heaven with a D. To fail to keep the Law at *any* point was like breaking the whole thing—much the same way that even if you only puncture a balloon at one point, it still won't hold *any* air at all. So for all the people who thought they were on God's good list because they had the circumcision part covered (which for Jewish men would have been a decision they didn't even *make* for themselves!) or because they were keeping kosher, Paul says they are opening themselves up to being held accountable for *all* the commandments, *all* of the time. It's like he's saying, "Good job on not eating bacon... but how are you doing on not *coveting* what your neighbor has?" "Nice job offering the proper sacrifices at the Temple... but are you really loving God with your *whole* heart?"

So, if the Law itself is to be believed, anybody who doesn't keep the *whole* thing 100% of the time is under the *curse* of the Law. The balloon is popped. As Paul would say in a similar argument in his letter to the Romans, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." In other words, everybody, both Jews and Gentiles, have failed at keeping God's commandments perfectly. So we are all liable, and we are all under the curses that went along with the laws as consequences for those who didn't keep it.

And this is where the cross comes in. Paul says that *Jesus* took that curse from us, by becoming accursed himself. The Torah said that anybody whose body was hung on a tree was to be considered accursed—and Paul says that is *exactly* what happened to Jesus. He took the power of the curse for us by becoming accursed, like someone sucking the poison out of a snake bite or your kidneys filtering toxins out of your blood. Jesus absorbed all the fury of the Law's curse, Paul says, so we could be free of it.

- How would you answer if someone asked you how Jesus' death could deal with our sins?
- What do you think of this idea that the Law is a whole, and that it has to be kept completely?

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Galatians 3:15-18—A Deal’s A Deal

While Paul is rummaging through the Old Testament, he brings up another point about the covenant God made with Abraham and his offspring: the promise came *four hundred thirty years* before Moses gave the commandments to the Israelites! The “Judaizer” party that had come to Galatia appealed to Bible verses to make their case, but they were only remembering as far back as the Law at Sinai. They seemed to think that the story only went as far back as God giving commandments in the book of Exodus. Paul says, “Wait a minute—our story starts before that! You’re not remembering *far back enough!* Abraham was given a covenant (a promise, a deal, a way of relationship) that couldn’t possibly be dependent on rule-keeping, because the “rules” weren’t given for hundreds of years later! And then Paul says, God doesn’t change the terms with us—a deal’s a deal with God. Paul gives the example of a person’s last will and testament, which once it is signed and notarized, can’t be changed by someone else. If I bequeath you my life-savings as a free gift, nobody else can sneak in and pencil in the words, “if you stay overnight in a haunted house first” or some other requirement. So Paul says the same is true with us and God. The promise to Abraham and his offspring did not include any fine print about religious rules or spiritual achievements, and so nobody else can add any fine print. A deal’s a deal, and God made a deal with Abraham and his offspring. Otherwise God’s promise wasn’t a promise.

Galatians 3:19-26—Goodbye to the Placeholder

After all of this talk about what the Law *couldn’t* do and *wasn’t* intended to do, Paul now has to answer a thorny question: “*Why then the law?*” In other words, why did God ever *give* the commandments and the laws of the Sinai covenant if it never saved anybody? If nobody ever was made right with God by their rule-following, then what the heck was the point?

Paul’s answer has to thread a difficult needle: he has to give a reason for the Law that explains why God would bother to give it to the Israelites, but he refuses to say that the Law was meant as a permanent fixture to get us and keep us in good standing with God. He has to say, in effect, that the Law was a *placeholder*. He borrows an image from his own culture when he talks about the Law as a “disciplinarian.” The Greek word he uses, *paidagogue*, is a word for a certain kind of servant/slave in a household, whose job was to raise and educate the children of the master (*you can see our English word “pedagogue” in there somewhere*). This slave was a teacher, guide, and yes, giver of discipline, but only for a time until the child came of age. The *paidagogue* was there to act in loco parentis, in place of the parents, but was essentially a placeholder, whose role would expire when the children were ready for it. Paul says this is essentially what God has done through the Law.

- Is the Law a good thing, or a bad thing, for Paul—or is it more complicated than that?
- Let’s explore Paul’s analogy: how does a child get a place in a family? Is it earned? Is it conditional? Is it a gift? Is it something you choose? What does this say about our relationship with God?

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Galatians 3:27-29—A New Creation

The pieces have been put into place. Paul has been setting them up from the beginning of the letter, driving to this conclusion: **the Gospel, because it is a message of *grace-alone*, makes an entirely new kind of community, one in which the old boundaries that divided us are no longer in force.** Since we are all covered, “clothed,” if you will, with Christ, you can’t see anything else but Christ among us. We are all made of equal worth and standing, all children in the same household. Now, at one level, that is a beautiful picture. But part of the beauty is also how *messy* it is, too. The community of Christ, the church, is going to be by definition, a motley crew. We will come from different backgrounds, different nationalities, different income levels, and different genders. There can be tensions when you get such diversity in the same room, not to even mention making them all into a new kind of “family.” Think about how each of the pairs Paul mentions breaks down a different set of barriers into something radically new—a whole new creation, in fact:

“There is no longer Jew or Greek...”

“Greek” here is another way of referring to the non-Jewish world, since the dominant cultural force of the day in the Empire was Greek. But this pairing gives Paul’s definitive answer to the Jew/Gentile question: no one would be required to keep the rules of Judaism in order to become a Christian, because Christ has broken down that old dividing line. The distinction between Jew and Gentile no longer separates us.

“There is no longer slave or free...”

Now things are getting interesting, because our pocketbooks are involved. Rich, poor, minimum wage, or millionaire, these things no longer make a difference in the Christian community. Or at least, they shouldn’t. Since the Christian community is called to see all that we have as a gift from God, we are also called to share with one another. And because God isn’t impressed with our money or status, we all have the same equal standing and access through Christ, regardless of what our tax bracket is. This is a little bit tougher of a boundary to let Paul erase, especially in our country today, because we tend to think of our money or economic class as something we have achieved, something that *should* set us apart from one another (especially to make me feel like I’m above someone else). But Paul wipes this boundary away, too.

“There is no longer male and female...”

This is maybe strangest of all—note the switch to “and” between the pairing, intentionally echoing the creation story where God creates human beings “male and female.” The boundaries that separated and distinguished men and women in the first century were torn down—you see it in the evidence of women’s leadership, partnerships between men and women, and the special honoring of women in the early church. There is something radical going on here—Paul is actually saying that what God has done in Christ even goes beyond the boundaries originally hardwired into the old creation itself!

- What are some of the challenges of really living in a community like this without dividing lines?
- What are some of the blessings and joys of living in a community like this?