

GOD'S LIBERATING LOVE—Why Stuck-up Religious People Need Grace

Galatians 1:6-24

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/why-stuck-up-religious-people-need-grace/>

I can't begin to impress upon you how important this book of the Bible is, or how important this sermon series is. Galatians was Martin Luther's favorite epistle. He said, "This is 'my' epistle." It has been called the Magna Carta of the early church, the manifesto of Christian liberty. Why liberty? Why did I entitle this series "God's Liberating Love"? Because there are two extremes which enslave us. The first one is no rules, regulations or restraint. Anything goes. Ego rules. The other (this morning's topic) is the opposite. Excessive rules and restraint, a legalism focused on keeping rules in order to please God. It enslaves. It enslaved Luther. How could he ever know if he had done enough to appease an angry God? So he kept doing more. And then he discovered Galatians.

Something had gone terribly wrong in the churches of the Galatian region of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey; Galatia was not a city; it was an area). Something was wrong. So Paul wrote this letter. He says he is astonished—frustrated, bewildered, angry and disappointed (v. 6). They have moved away so quickly from the Cross plus zero to the Cross plus these ceremonies or religious deeds.

PAUL FIRST OF ALL REMINDED THE GALATIANS THAT HE USED TO BE LIKE THEM, SMUG, SELF-RIGHTEOUS AND STUCK-UP, v. 13. Actually, a religious terrorist, destroying others in the name of a loving God (does anyone see the irony of that?). Tony Jones has written, "Christians are known not for our love, but for our fear: fear of gays, fear of change, fear of the end-times, fear of science, fear of the Other...How did we get here? How did the act of following Jesus go from something that was a response to God's love in the first century to a fear-based, avoidance-of-hell decision in the twenty-first?" [*Did God Kill Jesus?*, p. xx].

NEXT, PAUL SAYS HE USED TO BE LIKE THEM, ALWAYS COMPETING FOR GOD'S FAVOR, AGAINST OTHERS, AS IF IT'S A CONTEST, v. 14. You see, if you're saved by works, you always have to be looking over your shoulder, doing better than others, proving yourself. Once upon a time there were two brothers who terrorized a small town. Rowdy, drunken, violent. One day, one of them died. The surviving brother went to the local Baptist preacher and said, "I'll pay you \$1,000 if you'll say at my brother's funeral that he was a saint." So, at the service, the preacher said, "Now Tommy, our dearly departed, was a scoundrel, a cheat, a drunk. But compared to his brother, he was a saint."

The word "gospel" is used seventeen times in Galatians. What is the gospel? It's the good news that in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, God has acted to forgive and restore us. Note with me THREE THINGS Paul says about how the gospel works. 1) *The gospel comes from God to us, not from us to God.* Karl Barth said this is the difference between religion and Christianity. Religion is us reaching up to God. Christianity is God reaching down to us. Paul says the gospel

is a “revelation” (vv. 12, 16), not a discovery. How telling, that when Paul is bragging on his own works attempting self-salvation, the verbs are active (vv. 13-14), but when he begins to talk about his conversion, the verbs are passive (v. 15). Not only is a works salvation an insult to God; it also makes the good news bad news, because who can live up to all those commandments.

2) *The gospel is relationship-based, not rule-based* (“called me through his grace ...to reveal his Son to me...” vv. 15-16). Brennan Manning writes that these rule-keepers had “reduced God to a small-minded bookkeeper whose favor could be won by obeying rules.” And then they used this to intimidate, control and shame others [*Abba’s Child*, p. 61]. Faith in Jesus is not believing about but believing in. When our faith is reduced to a pendant we wear around our neck or a creed, we become enslaved, not free.

3) *The gospel really, really changes us*. Paul said there was such a change in him, believers were praising God (vv. 23-24). He had gone from stuck-up, self-righteous and smug to a servant in love with Christ and serving others. The world can argue the Bible isn’t reliable, theories of creation or philosophy. But it can’t argue with a changed life! You just can’t argue with results!

At the end of this epistle, Paul takes the pen in his own hand, and says see how large my letters are! What matters is not religious ceremony, ritual, rules, but a new creation (6:11ff). God’s new work...setting us free!