

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor  
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## A Short Sermon Series on the Book of Galatians Part III – Let's Do It

Galatians 3:23-29 (adapted from New Revised Standard version) 23 Now before faith came, we were confined under the law until faith would be revealed. 24 Therefore the law was our tutor until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. 25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, 26 for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. 27 As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 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. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Galatians 3:23-29 (The Message translation) 23 Until the time when we were mature enough to respond freely in faith to the living God, we were carefully surrounded and protected by the Mosaic law. 24 The law was like those Greek tutors, with which you are familiar, who escort children to school and protect them from danger or distraction, making sure the children will really get to the place they set out for. 25 But now you have arrived at your destination: 26 By faith in Christ you are in direct relationship with God. 27 Your baptism in Christ was not just washing you up for a fresh start. It also involved dressing you in an adult faith wardrobe - Christ's life, the fulfillment of God's original promise. 28 In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ. 29 Also, since you are Christ's family, then you are Abraham's famous "descendant," heirs according to the covenant promises.

I spent my childhood in suburban Ft. Worth, Texas. It was at the height of the post-World War II baby boom and all around our house there were other new houses being built in various stages of construction. Those construction sites were often our playgrounds. We would play hide-and-seek in the houses and we would raid the scrap pile for wood from which to make our various backyard clubhouses. But sometimes we would play in the big pile of sand that each house always had at one point when the builder was doing the driveway concrete work. We would bring our toy cars and trucks and toy soldiers and make roads and streams and lakes and exercise our imaginations

for hours on end. But I always had this odd need to be the one who drew in the boundary lines in that pile of sand. I would carefully draw in the town and state boundaries, carefully working in the sand to make my boundary lines nice and neat and tidy. My friends mostly tolerated this weirdness until I began to make up “what if” questions: *“Well, what if there is a car crash that occurs exactly on the boundary between two states? Who is in charge? We need a rule for that.”* So I would make up a rule. But then, since I’d almost always designed my little kingdom with three of the “states” touching, I would then wonder: *“What if someone (one of our little toy figures) died and fell exactly on the point where three states touched? We need a rule for that.”* So I would make up another rule. But I was never satisfied with my rules, and was always thinking up exceptions to them and so the rules got more and more complex. Two things usually happened at that point: I realized that I wasn’t having any fun but was just getting more and more anxious, and my friends would get frustrated and stomp through and erase all my carefully drawn boundary lines!

Now, rules in and of themselves are not bad things. And even rules that we may not understand can sometimes be good nonetheless. We teach our toddler not to stick a spoon in an electrical outlet even though he or she is incapable of understanding the nature of electricity. We teach him or her not to spray paint the cat, even though a lime green cat would look so cool. When students take driver’s ed they are indoctrinated with the rule that they should stop at stop signs, even if there is no one else coming the other way because having that rule ingrained and habitual could later prevent a tragedy. Human life and human community could not exist for very long without rules; without rules life would be, in philosopher Thomas Hobbes’ phrase, “nasty, brutish, and short.”

But rules – even good rules that make sense and are for the common good – are finally not enough for the very **fullest human life that God wants for each of us**. For a life that finds its meaning in *nothing but* rules – even good rules! – will **invariably be an over-anxious life**. Why? Well, you will always be worrying whether you’ve followed the rules well enough, whether you’ve followed the right rules in this or that situation, or whether you even know what the rules are! For you see, here’s the thing: even the best rules, followed consistently and well, will not be **enough** to give the kind of certainty to life that we all crave and to quell our anxiety.

This is the same context that St. Paul was writing about in our scripture today, as we continue our journey with Paul through his letter to the Galatian churches. Let us first recall the situation: Paul is writing to a church that is struggling with the question of whether those who would wish to become Christians must first become Jews. And while, as I have said before, that may seem an odd question to us, in the first fifty years of the church’s life it was in fact THE question. For if the answer to that question is “yes,” then those who wished to claim Christ would need to convert to Judaism first. But if Christ is understood as the sign of God’s unconditional love and grace to all people, then that good news is available to everyone without pre-condition. Paul, of course, as we have seen is arguing for the latter point of view – that nothing should come between God’s unconditional love and those who are seeking to know it. Today, Paul’s specific concern is the status of the Law and the Teachings – “the rules,” if you will – that were and are a central to Judaism. Now, this passage, just as with the one from last week is, as I said, full and dense; there is much, much we could say about it. But this morning let me say just three things:

First, we should never, ever use Paul's language here as saying that God has somehow rejected the Jewish people. Taking that step has been, history has too very sadly shown, the first step towards evil discrimination and pogroms and even the Holocaust itself. *In fact, nowhere in any of his writings, did Paul, in fact, ever repudiate or renounce his own Jewish faith.* In fact, more than once Paul asserts that he is proud to be a Jew, proud of his ability to keep the Torah, the Teaching, "the rules." No, what Paul is arguing here is that even for Jews, it is not the the "rules" **themselves** that are most important; rather, it is **the gracious love of God that stands behind those Teachings, those rules.** That is the meaning of the last line of our text for today, where Paul says *"And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."* Paul is saying that Abraham and Sarah were saved – "justified" in Paul's language – through their relationship with God and through God's grace to them. They lived before the Law, the Teachings, and so it couldn't have been those Teachings, that Law, that saved them, that offered their lives their ultimate significance; no, it was God's gracious love that was with them always and is with Christians always. Therefore anyone who believes in a God of unconditional love and grace are indeed Abraham's offspring, whether they are Jews or they are Christians. So, when you hear someone say that Jews believe that it is the Law, the rules, themselves that will save them, know that that is simply not true. What saves you and me and our Jewish brothers and sisters is the very same thing – God's gracious and unconditional love expressed through the Law and through Jesus of Nazareth.

But what then, secondly, of the meaning of and the reason for the Law, the

Teachings, “the rules” given to Moses? Paul uses a metaphor to answer. He says that the Law, the Teachings, the “rules” function like a “tutor.” A first century audience would have immediately understood his point; the word in Greek is “pedagogue” and a pedagogue is a person who, in well-off families, was the children’s guide and protector and teacher. He took them to school. He protected them. He taught them about life’s dangers. The Jewish law, the Torah, functions the same way, says Paul: it is a tutor, showing the pitfalls along life’s way, teaching what ways are best and what ways are worst, offering rules that enhance life. The Jewish Law, the Teachings, the “rules” – much of which, by the way, Jesus reaffirmed – are not signs of a God who somehow takes delight in making life hard for folks or who is looking for ways to trap folks, but exactly the opposite – the laws given to Moses are a **sign** of just how *much* God loves. They function to help humanity live together well and wisely, they are, like that ancient Greek “pedagogue” with his charges, designed to help folks avoid danger and engender mutual respect and care. The Ten Commandments are not an example of a God who hopes you’ll break the rules so He can punish you; no, they are the **sign** of a **God who loves us enough to help us live together well.**

But – third point – Paul’s most important point is this: neither for Christians nor Jews are “the rules” enough. For, as we have seen, the reliance only on rules of whatever sort, of whatever religion, or of no religion at all, will inevitably lead you to be anxious about whether you have followed those rules enough, of whether those rules are the right rules, whether you’ve forgotten about some rule. So what is Paul’s conclusion? It is one of the most grand verses in the whole New Testament; hear it again from the

New Revised Standard Version: *“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. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise. And Eugene Petersen’s translation is this: “ In Christ’s family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ. Also, since you are Christ’s family, then you are Abraham’s ... “descendant,” heirs according to the covenant promises.”*

But both ways of translating point to the very same thing: while rules and law are **necessary** for human community, those rules and laws are not **ultimate**. What **IS** ultimate is your and my **relationship** to God. We Christians have been given our access to that relationship to God through the good news and revelation of the person of Jesus. The Jewish people onto whom we have been grafted, as Paul puts it elsewhere, have access to that saving relationship with God through God’s promise to always be their God that was first given to Abraham and Sarah, as we saw this summer. And so this is the point: it is our **relationship** to the living, caring, loving God that is what is ultimate. And any rules, any laws, that would divide up human beings between better and worse, lesser and greater, in and out, is an affront to the God who would love and care for every creature God has made. We need rules, but those rules can never get in the way of God’s love of us. Too many Christians have forgotten this and have substituted a set of rules, a set of “required” beliefs, about this or that issue as being what it means to be Christian. It is a mistake that both liberals and conservatives make. But it’s one that Paul hopes we won’t make.

I have said before that every affirmation in the Bible is also to be understood as a challenge to you and me. And so it is here. For these wonderful words – “in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male or female, slave or free” – are not just an **assurance** of God’s love, but they are indeed also a **challenge** to you and to me, my friends. For you and I know that *in this world* they are **not yet true enough**. As one preacher puts it, “*When [Paul] says there is no Jew or Greek it is [our] call to make it so.....*”<sup>1</sup> “*A call to make it so.*” Divides between rich and poor still fester; ethnic suspicion and even murderous hatreds still tell us that there are indeed still distinctions – sad and sometimes terrible distinctions – between Jew and Palestinian, Sunni and Shiite, between liberal and conservative, between those who like the old music and those who love the new, and on and on. It **is** God’s intention that these differences never make for division, but that is not yet true enough on this earth. And so our call is to help make it so, to help make it so in some way large or small, tremendous or tiny. That’s the challenge that Paul offers you and me this week: what one act can **you** do, what words can pass **your** lips this week, that will lessen the pain of hurtful walls between human beings, that will indeed make God’s intention more true? What can you do that will make it more likely that there will be more understanding and less suspicion among people? I know there is something. God knows there is something. Let’s find it. Let’s do it.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>From “Baptized in the Storm,” a sermon preached by Terry Echelbarger at the Pacific School of Religion, November 7, 2000. <http://www.psr.edu/page.cfm?l=114&id=28> Emphasis mine.