

Message for Sunday June 22, 2025

Title: Cult of Normalcy

Scripture: Galatians 3:23-29

Welcome

Announcements: Giving Options. This month's special offering is Peace with Justice. There is a video.

Fellowship of Love

Song

Call to Worship

L: Come into the light of God's love.

P: Fear cannot separate us from its blessing.

L: Come to the house of healing and hope.

P: God's love makes us whole.

Unison Prayer

God of power and might, bring your awesome presence into our worship and our world.

Open us to your wholeness and healing and embolden us to answer your call, that we might face unafraid the demons of this world. Amen.

Offering/Song

Scripture: Galatians 3:23-29

Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed.

So, the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith.

Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

So, in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith,

for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

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Response

L: The word of God for the people of God.

P: Thanks be to God.

Message: Cult of Normalcy

Most of us have heard this scripture before. We have listened to it in the context of baptism liturgies or spoken of with fondness by those looking at how we as a community are formed. Because this is a well-loved and much-quoted scripture, those who have not heard “in Christ there is no Jew or Greek” are challenged to understand it today. As we are familiar with popular scriptures, we come to this passage with all sorts of baggage that we may not have with other parts of scripture. We have heard many times that this passage has been used well, to support the growth of us or others as Christians, and if you are like me, you have also heard this scripture used as a way to stifle conversation, as if being Christian erases all our differences.

Today, we will look at two distinct concepts in this passage. First is the treatment of the law by Paul, and second is the “no Jew or Greek” section. To build on this, I first want to address some of the overall themes within Galatians. First, Galatians is theorized to be one of, if not the earliest, writings we have in the New Testament. Scholars have generally placed most letters Paul wrote earlier than anything else in the New Testament. However, because our New Testament is arranged with the Gospels first, most think, “Oh, the gospels were written first.” This letter is also not in dispute for authorship. I have often talked about how a letter is or is not written by someone we have been traditionally taught, such as 1 & 2 Timothy; Paul did not write those letters. One of the ways this is done is by looking at the language and the theological development in the works. For 1 & 2 Timothy, there are theological issues being discussed that were not an issue for Paul and seem to be in direct conflict with what he says in earlier works. The language there is also used differently.

In Galatians, there are two general themes to keep in mind. First, Paul argues against people who want a more “traditional” approach to religious development. What I mean by this is that they are people who believe that to be Christian, a person should first be Jewish. The argument revolved around

circumcision and whether believers should be circumcised or not. This part is dealt with in our passage today, particularly within the first part of the pericope. This issue should not come as a surprise to most of us; if we have been in the church at some point, we should have heard about Paul's issues with "Judaizers."

The second overall theme in Galatians is Paul's issues with Peter. I have often found it humorous that people think in the early church that the apostles and all the believers were as one and just wanted to share the gospel. The early church was just as divided as the church is today. People are at the core, fundamentally people. Division and disagreement are natural. Paul disagreed with Peter over some of his practices and the council in Jerusalem's rulings on different theological subjects. This comes up in 1 Corinthians as well when Paul is addressing meat sacrificed to idols, where his solution is "eat it and don't tell anyone," which is a direct contradiction with what the council in Jerusalem said to do in the book of Acts. This issue with Peter is not tackled in our passage today. Still, I wanted to mention it because I think it is necessary to point out that, given some of the unifying aspects of the passage today, even the apostles were not all of one mind on things.

Our passage this morning is often quoted, but many assumptions are made when we quote it. Let us break this passage down into two sections. The first section is verses 23-25,

"Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian," (New Revised Standard Version 1989)

The final verse of this part is part of a two-part sentence that will connect our two sections. This first part is reflective of the role of the law in the formation of Christians. There has been a tendency in Christianity today to promote Old Testament laws as the rule of faith. We have seen legislation in several states and even on the federal level display the Ten Commandments in classrooms. My question is why? Why do we want the laws displayed? How does that help us?

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This is an example of Christians living by the law, in my opinion. It is placing the law of the Old Testament over and above the grace of Christ that Paul is pointing us to right here. Now I am not the first nor will I be the last to note this problem of quoting the law above the grace of Christ. Remember here, Paul is arguing about this very thing: the law was given as a transition period to prepare Israel for Christ, and it is no longer the defining characteristic of faith. Of course, I cannot talk about this subject without mentioning one of my favorite quotes that demonstrates how noticeable this is to people outside of the church,

“For some reason, the most vocal Christians among us never mention the Beatitudes (Matthew 5). But, often with tears in their eyes, they demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. And of course, that’s Moses, not Jesus. I have not heard one of them demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere. ‘Blessed are the merciful’ in a courtroom? ‘Blessed are the peacemakers in the Pentagon? Give me a break!”
– Kurt Vonnegut

If we live by the law and enshrine the law then there is a sharp divide between our experience of Grace and our expectations of the Christian life.

The second section of this verse is intertwined with the first, but I want us to reflect on it separately, a little bit, Galatians 26-29,

“for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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.” (New Revised Standard Version 1989)

Paul turns our attention to the fact that now, in Christ, those differences are removed, and we are all heirs of Christ.

I wanted to reflect on this separately because of what is termed the “cult of normalcy.” This is a concept in disability theology that is spoken of in many different places. Still, to give you an idea of what this is, there is an expectation to be “normal,” whatever that may mean in a particular cultural

context. One of my professors, Leon Van Ommen, wrote in his book “Autism and Worship,”

“In the cult of normalcy, worship belongs to the god Normal and goddess Average, which become the godheads of this cult. We obey the power of the Normal by striving to be as close as possible to the Average (Galton’s Q2 and Q3) or even to go beyond (Q4).” (Ommen 2023, 85)

This scripture passage has often been used to erase differences in the pursuit of Christian unity, which does not exist. Paul says, “There is no longer Jew or Greek,” meaning we must all be the same and in agreement! This is a fundamental misunderstanding of what Paul is arguing here. Paul says that as Christians, our faith takes priority over other distinctions. The other distinctions are not erased; they are subject to our adoption and identity in Christ.

Years ago, we discovered a restaurant in Scottsdale, Lo Lo’s Chicken and Waffles. One of our favorite places to eat is a soul food place, and if you are not aware of soul food, it has definite historical, cultural, and racial ties. This was 6 or 7 years ago, and Sophia was significantly younger and immature, but I still remember the first time we went. She sat there, and a moment of realization swept over her. We were the only white people in the whole place. I recognized what she was thinking and told her that is how you know this will be good soul food. I did not attempt to erase the differences she saw; we were stepping into a different culture. Instead, I invited her to join in on what was uniting everyone in that restaurant-good food.

Paul here invites us to remember that our identity as Christians precedes everything else. Who we are in Christ does not erase our differences or experiences; instead, it enables us to find common ground so that we might live in Christ's grace. Today's sermon is both a warning and an encouragement. The warning is, do not be so focused on the law or differences that you forget the grace of Christ. The encouragement is that God does not accept you because you can and should be like everyone else; God accepts you with your differences intact. If you do not believe me, go back to my quote on the cult of normalcy and try to figure out if you are normal. I hate to break it to you, but I have never met a normal person yet!

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Christ has accepted you and brought you into the family of God! Go and do likewise for others, put aside the law, the cult of normalcy, and be the person God is calling you to be so that others may live into the fullness of Christ. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer/Lord's Prayer

Song

Benediction

Song

Goodbye