

WHY BE GOOD?

Living letters: Christ has set us free

Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62; 1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21

Paul has more than one problem on his hands
at the church in Galatia.

We spent a couple Sundays now looking at *one* big problem.
We're about to uncover a second big one.

Both problems stem from the fact Jewish believers in Jesus
were being asked to accept Gentile believers as full partners in faith,
without making them become Jews.

And this required a seismic shift for Jewish believers.

They had to completely change their minds about social taboos,
and now freely fellowship with Gentiles,
sit in their homes, and eat at their tables.

We have *no idea* how huge this was.

And they had to shift their theology.

to change their beliefs about the nature of salvation itself.

They were now being told salvation was available to *all*,
by God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ,
without being descended from Abraham
and following the practices Jewish law requires.

This led to a backlash, and problem number one—legalism.

Some Jews tolerated Gentiles joining the church,
but they insisted new converts *also* become Jews,
and follow the law.

So they went around preaching Jewish legalism—
the need to practice circumcision,
and follow dietary laws, and other purity rituals.

In Galatians, and elsewhere,

Paul called them out on this corruption of the gospel
and pleaded for the believers to hold fast
on salvation by grace through faith in Jesus.

But as it often goes,
when you introduce something new into a system,
reactions can go in two opposite directions.

So legalism was only *one* problem.

It had an opposite counterpart—libertarianism.

That's what Paul is taking aim at in today's text, Galatians 5,
the idea that because of God's lavish grace, anything goes.

Preaching salvation by grace is *dangerous*.

Much better, if you want things clear, and stable, and orderly,
to have an objective legal standard
by which we can measure one's level of righteousness
Grace opens up all kinds of unpleasant possibilities.

For one,

the Gentiles *welcomed* the fact that they could be included
without having to jump through all the Jewish hoops.

But then some took it to an *excess*.

They concluded there *was* no moral law
by which to judge right and wrong.

Their hedonistic culture still held some appeal,
so spiritual freedom meant license to behave as they wished.

And then there were Jews who for whatever reason,
were *already* chafing under the requirements of Moses' law.
Maybe they were jealous of the freedoms they saw around them.
So once they learned from Paul and others that *actually*,
circumcision and diet and ritual purity was *not* what saved them,
then it wasn't too big of a leap
to also throw away the laws of Moses that spoke to
how they treated others economically,
or how they exercised power over others,
or how they behaved sexually.
And they thought, isn't grace *grand*?

For Gentiles *and* Jews,

the idea of freedom from old legal framework was rather . . .
intoxicating.

They could get *used* to this.

The problem was, as they let go of the old ethical framework
that consisted entirely of earning righteousness,
and earning God's favor,

they had no *other* ethical framework to take its place.

Which leaves a perplexing question:

“If our good conduct contributes nothing to salvation,
and if salvation is *purely* God’s free gift of grace . . .
why be good?”

“Why be good?”

That was what the Galatians were asking.

And there’s a fine line between legalism and libertarianism.

So Paul needed to give a careful, nuanced answer.

Which is why he wrote Galatians 5.

In our reading we skipped from verse 1 to 13 and following.

But I want to pick up a verse we missed.

Because I think his answer is summed up in verse 6:

Paul says, it’s not following the law that saves you,
nor being free from the law that saves you.

Neither one count for *anything*, he says.

But, (and let me quote Paul exactly) “the only thing that counts
is faith working through love.”

This one sentence completes Paul’s argument in the book of Galatians.

There is a 3-part progression in his argument.

Paul preaches grace which evokes faith that expresses itself in love.

There *is* an ethical framework for those who
put their faith in Jesus for their salvation.

And it’s no cake-walk.

It’s not cheap grace.

There is a *rigorous* ethical framework.

Christian ethics is centered on
sacrificial love patterned after Jesus Christ.

Paul quotes none other than Jesus in v. 14 when he writes,

“The whole law is summed up in a single commandment,
‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Now let’s be *clear*.

Paul is not promoting a new legal system here.

Love is not just a new law to replace the old.

It’s not just a different way to *earn* God’s saving grace.

Otherwise we’ve just created a new legalism.

No, the good new news is that salvation is God’s doing.

It’s God’s initiative. It’s God’s free gift of grace.

But it’s a gift that sets in motion a chain of events,
events made possible only by God’s grace.

God’s initiative of *grace* evokes in us a response of *faith*,
which then works itself out through *love*.

You see, grace draws us to trust deeply in the one
who made this gracious move *toward* us.

And our trust transforms us into the image
of the one in whom we put our trust.

We are drawn to love like *Jesus* loved.

We are drawn to express faith the way *Jesus* did,
by obeying God’s great love command:

“Love the Lord your God, with all you have and are.
And love your neighbor as yourself.”

So how do we get from opening ourselves to God’s grace,
to living a life of sacrificial love of God and others,
without falling into the ditch on either side—

legalism that assumes we need to work to earn God’s grace,
or libertarianism that assumes since God’s saving grace is *free*,
we are *also* free to define our own ethics.

Well, the answer, according to Paul,

is that the path from grace to love, passes through faith.

In other words,

we get from free saving grace,
to the rigorous ethic of sacrificial love,
by responding to God’s grace with profound, radical trust—
that is, faith.

And we had two other scripture readings in today’s lectionary,
that illustrate this very kind of faith.

An Old Testament and a Gospel story,

both of which, I should warn you, are not for the faint of heart.

You may wonder, when we look at them,
why they're even in the same Bible as Paul's glorious words
on salvation by grace.

Let's look at the Gospel story first.

Jesus doesn't come across in this story as being very . . . *well* . . .
gracious.

In Luke 9:51ff, it says he "set his face toward Jerusalem"
and while he was on the way,
he encountered some potential disciples,
people who wanted to follow him.

One of them said, "Wherever you go, I will go."

Jesus tried to talk him out of it, warning him of the hardships.
And another person, Jesus invited; said, "Follow me."

And the man said, "sure, but let me first go and bury my father."
Jesus' response? "Let the dead bury their own dead."

And a third said, "I'll go with you,
but let me first go say farewell to my family."
Jesus retorted, "No one who puts their hand to the plow
and looks back, is fit for the Kingdom of God."

Obviously, this isn't one of those "sweet Jesus" stories.

Although some commentators try their best to make it *into* one.
Scholars bend over backward trying to interpret the excuses
of these three persons,
as actually being unreasonable.

Such as, saying that, well, because of ancient burial customs,
the man who wanted to bury his father
was really asking for a one-year delay.

That may well be possible.

But it's a moot point.

This passage isn't even *trying* to illustrate
how nice and sweet and gracious Jesus *is*.

The point of this passage is that
the agenda of the kingdom of God is *urgent*.

Twice it tells us "Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem."

And urgency requires complete—and immediate—
trust in the leader.

You know, when the fire department is racing toward

the scene of a house fire, sirens wailing,
the rookie crew member doesn't ask the captain
to make a quick stop at 7-11
because he missed breakfast that morning.

Jesus is making clear that being his follower
demands that we give our all. *Now*.

The only way to do that is to trust Jesus completely,
that he knows what he's doing,
and when it needs to be done.

There is a word for that kind of
all-out, immediate, and unqualified trust.
It's called faith.

Read *that* meaning of "faith" into Paul's words,
when he says, salvation is only by grace,
through *faith in Jesus Christ*.

We *can read* that meaning of faith into Paul's words,
because that's what Paul *meant* by faith.

That's the kind of faith Paul demonstrated in his *own* life.

When he deliberately walked into situations
that resulted in him being whipped, stoned, imprisoned,
shipwrecked, homeless, and hungry.

Paul preaching cheap grace? I don't think so.

Then there's the Old Testament story, from 1 Kings 19.

Also not for the faint of heart.

This is *another* discipleship story.

The young man Elisha was being asked
to follow the master prophet of Israel, Elijah,
and become his disciple and apprentice.

Elijah found Elisha out plowing in the family fields,
walked up beside Elisha
and threw his mantle over Elisha's shoulder.

This was a symbolic and powerful act.

Elisha knew *immediately* what it meant.

It meant that Elijah, this renowned prophet,

a prophet both loved and hated throughout the land,
was choosing him to be his successor.
And Elisha dropped the reins and went after Elijah,
and told him, “Let me kiss my father and my mother,
and then I will follow you.”
And Elijah said, “Of *course*. Do as you please.”
A different response than Jesus gave.
So obviously we can’t say the Bible teaches us
that we *always* have to forsake our family obligations
in order to be faithful to God . . .
Or that it’s *never* okay to stop at 7-11 for an egg sandwich.

But clearly in this story,
Elisha wasn’t asking to say goodbye
because he wasn’t committed,
or because he was pulling some delay tactic.
Clearly not, because in the very next verse it tells us what he *did*.
Elisha slaughters his team of oxen. He butchers them.
He chops up the wood from his plowing equipment,
and builds a fire to boil the meat.
He cooks a feast, and serves it up to the people.
This is radical following.
Elisha was destroying any *possibility* of a Plan B.
This is even *more* radical than James and John
walking away from their fishing boats
when Jesus called them,
leaving their father Zebedee holding the nets.
At least James and John didn’t sink their boats
and cut up their nets.
If they changed their mind later on,
they could go back to their father and go fishing again.
But Elisha completely destroyed the very means of his livelihood,
before he began following Elijah.
What if this prophet thing didn’t work out the way he hoped?
There would be no turning back.
Elisha took Plan B, and burned it, and boiled it.

There is a word for that kind of all-out, immediate,
and unqualified trust in the one who calls us.

It’s called faith,
the very kind of faith Paul calls for in Galatians.

Those two stories are perfect illustrations
for *how* we get from free grace to sacrificial love.
We trust the one who calls us.
And we do all within our power and will—
and we *do* have power and will—
to nurture a relationship of trust
with this one who calls us.
There are essential spiritual disciplines that grow faith,
that nurture trust.
For instance, we come together to worship
to hear the stories again,
to listen to each other’s story.
We pray for the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives.
We spend time in the scriptures,
allowing them to form us,
allowing the scriptures to read us.
We practice mutual care,
mutual admonition,
mutual discernment.
We practice giving and receiving hospitality,
so we learn to recognize and trust
the Jesus we meet in those around us.
And we practice saying “yes”
when we hear Jesus say to us, “Follow me.”

Let us practice saying yes right *now*, in song,
as we sing together a song of commitment,
Sing the Story #40: We will follow, we will follow Jesus
And let’s just see where it takes us.

—Phil Kniss, June 27, 2010