

Galatians

Good morning ZPC!! Several weeks ago I had the chance to teach alongside the one and only Scott Shelton as Jerry was out of town and at the beginning of that message Scott said, when Jerry's away, we will play. Well, today, neither Jerry nor Scott is here, so we're about to have some fun. About a month ago we started into a series on Galatians and week by week we've been working our way through this letter that Paul writes to the church in Galatia. I have to be honest and say that we're at what I would consider the last week of what's been a somewhat tedious look at Paul's take on Grace versus the Law. If I had to crudely break Galatians down, I would say Chapters 1 and 2 are personal, Paul is defending his right as an apostle, Chapters 3 and 4 are doctrinal, Grace vs. the Law and Chapters 5 and 6 are practical. Today we find ourselves in Galatians 4:21, the end of Paul's take on Grace/Law doctrine. Chapters 5 and 6 are full of great stuff and I'm really looking forward to getting into that, but we're not quite there. So Galatians 4:21:

Tell me, you who desire to be subject to the law, will you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman. One, the child of the slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise. Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother. For it is written,

*"Rejoice, you childless one, you who bear no children,
burst into song and shout, you who endure no birth pangs;
for the children of the desolate woman are more numerous
than the children of the one who is married."*

Now you, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac. But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the scripture say? "Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman." So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman.

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Jerry mentioned this last week, but Jerry, Scott and I have talked about these last couple chapters of Galatians and about how Paul is painstakingly making his point that grace is a better way to live, that the law keeps us chained, makes us slaves, that the gospel is for everyone, no strings attached. The text this morning, here in chapter 4 and the beginning of 5, is Paul's last jab. And he uses a familiar story, a story that most of us know. Abraham and Sarah. Now remember, Paul is addressing a group of people in Galatia, a group of Jewish Christians that are telling Gentiles (non-Jews) that they have to do Jewish stuff in order to be Christian. Paul is trying to combat that and we find him using the story of Abraham and Sarah.

Pretend with me for a moment that you are a good first century Jew. As a good first century Jew you go to school starting at around age 5. At age 5 you go to your local synagogue and meet your rabbi who for the next 4 or 5 years teaches you the Torah (the Torah is the first 5 books of the Bible). Most of you, being the good first century Jews that you are, at age 10 will finish up with this first chunk of school and at age 10 or so, most of you will have the Torah memorized. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, memorized. You don't just know the stories, you know the stories, you know the words, they're a part of you, you take them with you. This is especially true for Paul, who may have been...no, he was, a better first century Jew than you. Paul studied as a rabbi under one of the most respected and known rabbis at that time, Gamaliel. Paul wasn't a fisherman or a shepherd or a tax collector, he was a student, studying to be a rabbi.

To get to this point, Paul would have completed the three levels of school and would have, at that point, most likely memorized all of the Scriptures, Genesis through Malachi, memorized, and not just memorized but known. So now back to Paul's letter. It is Jewish Christians in Galatia that are unable to let go of Jewish customs and are demanding that Gentiles adopt Jewish custom and law in order to be Christian and Paul steps in and reminds them of a story, a story that they all know, a story they all have memorized, the story of Abraham and Sarah. Just in case some of the details are fuzzy, I'll give you a quick recap.

God made a promise to Abraham that Abraham would father a great nation. God made this promise when Abraham was 75 and Abraham's wife Sarah was about 65. Fast forward 10 years later, no child. So Abraham is 85 and Sarah is 75. Abraham and Sarah begin to seriously doubt (and rightfully so) that this promise thing is going to play out at this point. So Sarah, in not one of her finest moments, says I don't think this is going to work out, God obviously needs our help here; how about I arrange for my servant Hagar to bear a child for us? (Guys, if this conversation somehow finds you and you are in a similar situation as Abraham finds himself, don't do as Abraham did.) So that's what happens. Abraham takes Hagar as a wife and they have a child and they name him Ishmael. As you might have guessed, this didn't go over well. Despite this being Sarah's idea, Sarah is pretty ticked, to the point that Sarah treats Hagar pretty poorly and Hagar and Ishmael run away. Fast forward again, this time 15 years. Abraham is now 99 years old (Hebrews 11:12 – Good as dead) and Sarah is about 90. God, being God, follows through on his promise and Sarah has a child and they name him Isaac. So we have two columns basically:

Abraham

Sarah	Hagar
Free	Slave
Isaac	Ishmael
Son of the promise	Son of the flesh
born out of miraculous circumstances	born of natural circumstances

So Paul uses this story, as he says, as an allegory, a way of telling the story that might open our eyes to something we hadn't yet seen. It's really a brilliant argument because the Jewish Christians in Galatia are saying: *Yea its good that you believe in this Jesus guy, but you'll have to obey the law before you can be considered a child of Abraham.* And Paul's basic point is: *The moment you believed in this Jesus guy, you were a child of Abraham, heirs to the promise. And the moment you start thinking that you have to obey the whole of the law, you are not a child of Abraham at all!* In our columns that Paul has created he also adds Mount Sinai and the current Jerusalem to the mix. Mount Sinai being the place where Moses was given the law and Jerusalem being the nucleus of the Jewish faith, because that's where the temple is. Paul adds these two holy, sacred places to our Hagar column, essentially saying to these devout Jewish Christians in Galatia that they are not children of Sarah but they are children of Hagar, that they are slaves, that the law you so desperately cling to has left you in chains. I can't imagine these words went over well with our Jewish friends.

The gentiles in Galatia are being told by our devout Jewish friends that they are polluted and flawed and need the law to in order to make things right. But Paul is telling us that the gospel does not care who you are, the gospel does not care who you were. You may be a spiritual or moral outcast as marginal and as unlikely as the 'barren woman', but the gospel does not care. Grace does not care. The gospel does not care who you are or who you were. Grace does not care who you are or who you were. It is good news of God come to earth, crucified, dead and resurrected and it's for everyone, not contingent on anything that we can do.

But these Jewish Christians were keeping Gentiles from the gospel, keeping them at arms length from grace, they were saying that Jesus, grace, the gospel are contingent on something else. Which raises an interesting question for us today, for ourselves and our church family: How are we keeping people from Jesus, from grace, from the gospel, what do we put in the way as an obstacle?

I'm a pretty big baseball fan, in particular I'm a pretty big Cubs fan. And, I've been to my fair share of baseball games, but there is something special about a Cubs game at Wrigley Field. Even Cub haters have to admit that there is just something about watching a game at Wrigley. It's called "The Friendly Confines" for good reason....side note: alright here are some big stakes...who named it that. Now for bigger stakes, I'll give somebody \$5 if they can explain this:

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(in the year of our cubs – division/NL pennant/world series)

So, back to Wrigley....it's a special place and I remember about 10 years ago I was at a game and it was one of those games where everything was going wrong....which is pretty typical for the Cubs—until the 9th inning when it mattered. The Cubs were down by 5 in the bottom of the 9th inning...by 5.....slowly but surely the Cubs started to come back, runs were coming in, the crowd was getting into it, high fives were being given when they'd get a hit...if we ever go to a game together you're getting a high five, I was high fiving everyone who had their hand up...I was going a couple rows up to give high fives and that's all well and good but I remember the Cubs tying the game up and the high fives turned into hugs...before I even knew what had happened a total stranger was latched onto me as though we had been separated from birth. I saw one guy who was on the floor of the bleachers holding onto another guy's legs...hugging his legs.....it was getting out of control. And don't get me wrong I'm as enthusiastic as the next guy about the Cubbies, but what is happening? It was a moment at which my personal space was being challenged...it was being pushed and pulled and hugged and it was weirding me out. And that's not to mention the restrooms at Wrigley...talk about invasion of personal space.

Speaking of which, when I think of personal space and times that its been pushed I think of the 500. I've been going to the 500 for a lot of years, even before I originally moved to Indy. Growing up in Louisville, my dad, my uncle and my cousins would all come up for the race every year. And there is nothing like 400,000 people crammed into the Speedway. The seats aren't really seats, there's only enough room to get like one cheek on this thing, its crazy. Personal space at the 500 isn't an option. You get close, you get as cozy as you can and hold on for the next 4 hours or so.

All of us have this personal space. We all have this space that we allow people into and exclude others from entering. Who are we excluding? It's a question we have to always ask ourselves.

Have you ever seen a middle school boy that is just so badly trying to fit in with the crowd? That was me. Have you ever seen this? A middle school boy is quite possibly the most awkward of all human life forms (I can say that because I was a middle school boy at one time in my life)....trying so hard to connect and to fit in and find their place and just not cutting it, it's heart breaking...and the reason why it's heart breaking?

We were never made to be excluded, to hold grudges, to hold people at arms length, to hold bitterness and frustration and disappointment. Are we excluding? Holding others at a distance? Are we having conversations with our neighbors? Conversations that show grace, conversations that include and invite?

Paul is confronting exclusion, he is opening a new worldview that says this Jesus guy is for everyone, grace is for everyone, the gospel is for everyone, no exclusions, no exceptions, no contingencies.

When I read through this passage, there's one more thing that stands out to me and it's not the words on the page but the thing that's behind the words, Paul. There are moments in our lives when we find out that things we thought we understood are really not what we thought at all. Like when we found out that Bruce Willis was actually dead through the whole movie. There are moments in life that open our eyes to a new reality and those moments are powerful and they are sacred.

Sitting in a remote camp in Zhitomyr, Ukraine, I found myself holding an 11 year old boy named Vitalik, he told us to call him Tali. Tali was born with severe mental disabilities and physical deformities and he was born into a society that makes strong attempts to hide these children. Under the Soviet Union, Ukraine and many other Eastern European nations, established orphanages that were funded by the Union. The orphanages, scattered all over remote regions of Ukraine, became homes for thousands of boys and girls born with mental disability or physical deformity. In December of 1991, when the Soviet Union dissolved, the money that kept these orphanages going dried up, when the money dried up, so did the staff, supplies, the medications, the upkeep on the buildings. Years passed by and many of the orphanages were simply forgotten and shoved into the closet in hopes that maybe they'd just disappear. If you let your imagination run wild about what could possibly happen in these orphanages over years of neglect I'm sure you wouldn't even come close to the conditions. Many of the children, which were no longer children, but young adults, had spent years in a small room, with the littlest human contact possible. Over the years, most of them had only seen someone walk past their room periodically to throw them a piece of bread or leave a bucket of water somewhere for them to share. Many times those that did what they could were old staff that had developed a connection with the children but couldn't do more than offer them the leftovers of what little they already had. As local organizations with a heart for these kids began to share their story, groups and churches began to help out and send supplies and people to lend a hand.

Spending time with these absolutely beautiful people changed my life. This was one of my Damascus road experiences. Holding Tali, an 11 year old boy who was at best 60 pounds soaking wet, it hit me like a ton of bricks that we are all part of this thing, we are all on this journey together, we all need to help each other out and that there are no ordinary people.

There are moments in life that open our eyes to a new reality and those moments are powerful and they are sacred. There are moments in our lives when we find out that things we thought we understood are really not what we thought at all. Paul was a good Jew, a radical Jew. How Paul is able to talk about grace in the ways that he does in Galatians is nothing short of amazing. It's a complete shift in worldview. Paul's run in with Jesus on the road to Damascus changed him; Paul's run in with grace changed him. In Corinthians Paul says, "by the grace of God I am what I am and His grace to me was not without effect." The moments in our lives where we run into Jesus, where we experience grace, where what we thought we understood things but we really had no idea, those moments are important, they're powerful, they're holy and sacred.

My hope and prayer for ZPC, for each one of you is that you find those moments, that we seek them out, look for them. You don't have to go to Ukraine or Haiti. I have a friend, her name is Mama Gross (I know I know, it's an unfortunate last name, but it's hers and she was my friend) Mama Gross was from Canton, MS and while I was leading a group of high school students on a trip there to help lead VBS I had the privilege to help repair some things in Mama's house. Mama made me sit with her one day, for several hours, she said I was too busy and needed to sit. She gave me some dandelion wine and we sat there and talked for hours. Mama Gross changed the way I saw the world. Mama made me promise to send her a card on Emma's birthday every year with a picture of Emma in it. Keep in mind she'd never met Emma. Emma was 6 months old when I'd met Mama and I had only shown her pictures of Emma. You don't even need to go to MS for these moments either. Some of you in this room this morning are dear friends and I've had these same moments sitting, laughing, and sharing a meal together with you, sitting and sharing stories and realizing that we're on this thing together and we need each other's help and that no matter how hard we try to do it on our own, we just fail and in the end we desperately need grace and the gospel. Paul figured this out because of that moment on an ordinary road when grace landed right in front of him.

Brennan Manning, one of my favorite authors said that "My deepest awareness of myself is that I am deeply loved by Jesus Christ and I have done nothing to earn it or deserve it."