

Galatians 3:15-29 and Galatians 4:1-7
July 19, 2020

- 1) Introduction 3:15-29 – In the previous verses Paul focused on the character of Abraham, arguing that the Gentiles were also heirs to the promises made to the Hebrew patriarch. Ethnic identity no longer closes the door to non-Jews. If ethnicity no longer defines the family of God and if the marks of that ethnicity – circumcision and kosher practice – no longer define the family of God, then what about the law itself – the Torah? The Torah is THE defining characteristic of Jewish life. Even when they lost their land, even when Temple was ransacked, even in captivity the Jews maintained their faith because they had the Torah. In these verses Paul turns to the role of the law for the Gentile Christian community.

- 2) Galatians 3:15-18 – Abraham’s Promise and the Law
 - a) Paul writes in verse 17 that the promises God made to Abraham came 430 years before the law. Since the covenant God made with Abraham was confirmed by both parties, it is not possible to negate or alter that agreement at some later date. In verse 15 Paul likens the situation to a person’s will which has been signed and sealed. Wendy and I have just updated our wills, and after signing before witnesses and a notary we fully expect our wishes to be followed, without exception. Happily, our daughters are in full agreement. You can’t change the will and you can’t change the covenant when all the parties have agreed. Not even the Torah can abrogate God’s promises to Abraham, which extended to the Gentiles.

 - b) In his commentary Charles Cousar argues that Paul may have had another reason for his line of argument. Most rabbis at this time had come to affirm that the Torah existed prior to the creation of the world, insisting that God studied and abided by the law in creation and in all that God had done since. Paul is discarding that view and placing God’s gift of the law on the same historical spectrum that includes Abraham and Christ.

3) Galatians 3:19-25 – Why God Gave the Law

- a) In verse 19 Paul raises the question “Why then the law?” and answers very specifically: “because of transgressions.” Paul clearly understood that sin had been in the world since Adam, but prior to the law human wrongdoing was a different thing. The unconscious errors of people became, under the law, willful disobedience. The law turned moral immaturity into a legal offense, something that was contrary to the will of God. With the coming of the law human sin now involved condemnation, defilement, and guilt.
- b) In verse 24 Paul describes the law as a “disciplinarian.” The Greek word translated “disciplinarian” referred to a slave whose task was to oversee children when they were not attending school. That slave kept the children in line and made sure they studied their lessons. Paul says that the law does that for us; it teaches us and keeps us in line. We needed that education in the ways of righteousness, and we needed those boundaries prohibiting the unjust expressions of our sin.
- c) In verse 25 Paul proclaims that we are no longer restrained by the disciplinarian and no longer subject to the limitations imposed by legalistic restrictions. Now, “faith has come,” and this changes everything. We no longer relate to God through a rule book or series of pious practices. As stated in verse 26, “in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.” We have been made a part of God’s family by faith in Jesus Christ and not by works of the law. The law served a purpose to discipline and to educate us, but now, Christ has made us all to become children of God through faith in him.
- d) It is helpful to see these words from the perspective of Paul’s own biography. Before his conversion Paul was zealous in his study of the law and in his keeping of the law. But after meeting Christ on the Damascus road, Paul found a new life and a new freedom. For Paul, salvation was to be found through faith and not through the law.

4) Galatians 3:26-29 – Equality

- a) Charles Cousar sees these 4 verses as the climax of the book. From the very opening Paul focused on the unity of the Christian fellowship. The reason for his Jerusalem meeting with Peter, James, and John was to affirm that his mission to the Gentiles would not splinter the Christian church. The reason Paul confronted Peter in Antioch was because of the issue of church unity. The focus of chapter 3 was to redefine the people of God in order to include both Jew and Gentile. In this passage that unity is given an explicit and revolutionary definition. He addresses the diverse Galatian community and proclaims in verse 26, “in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.” The mark of their faith is no longer the law or the works of the law but Christ Jesus. The name of Christ is repeated 5 times in these verses. It is Christ and not the law that assures the inclusion of all in the family of faith.
- b) Not only is the family of faith inclusive of Jew and Gentile, in the family of faith that inclusion brings about an equality of all its members. There are no racial barriers, there are no gender barriers, and there are no barriers between those who are slaves and those who are free. Ethnic, social, and sexual differences disappear. Feelings of superiority and inferiority are banished. In the family of Christ all these differences are irrelevant. At the foot of the cross the ground is wondrously level.
- c) The teachings of Paul, we know from his writings to the Corinthians, were meant to be applied to our relationships outside of the church as well as to our Christian fellowship. That means that these words have to do with how we treat people of other races, sexual orientation, or social class. And this treatment does not apply only to personal acquaintances, it also has to do with the society in general. Verse 28 is a revolutionary statement and we dare not treat it as applying only in a limited sense. Far too often the church has failed to live by these words. In our southern context, sadly, the church has too often led in the opposite direction, especially on issues of race. I would guess that even Paul did not understand the full implication of the words he wrote in verse 28. To make these truths come alive in our society is clearly the task of the church today. Never has that been more important.

5) Galatians 4:1-7 – Heirs of the Promise

- a) In chapter 3 Paul symbolized the law as a jailer and as a disciplinarian. Now, in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 4 Paul makes use of a 3rd image and speaks of a child who inherited much wealth and property following the father's death. Until the child reaches a certain age the inheritance is managed by trustees and the child is controlled by guardians. Until he comes of age the child has no rights; he might as well be a slave. Obviously, the guardians and trustees symbolize the law. In verse 3, Paul tells us we are like that child controlled by the "elemental spirits" of the world around us.
- b) In verses 4 and 5 Paul turns to Jesus Christ as the one who changes the child's life, allowing the child to come into its full inheritance. Paul may be speaking a great deal more incarnational theology than he realizes, but he speaks of God's son being born of a woman. Then he speaks of Jesus coming not only in human form but under the same restrictions imposed on the child awaiting its inheritance. In other words, Jesus comes appearing to be in our exact situation. In verse 5 Paul argues that only one who comes into our life of enslavement can free us from the shackles of slavery. More than freedom, we discover we are God's child as well. New Testament scholar and preacher Fred Craddock tells the story of Ben Hooper who was an illegitimate child growing up in East Tennessee not knowing who his daddy was. At the close of a revival meeting one day the young boy was seized by the traveling preacher and asked: "Whose boy are you anyway?" Frightened by the judgmental question, the boy wanted to escape but then he heard the minister say: "I know whose boy you are. You are God's child and God has something he wants you to do." Those words changed that young boy's life. He later became governor of the state of Tennessee. Ben Hooper's story is our story as well. We are God's child and God has something he wants us to do.
- c) In verses 6 and 7 Paul describes the results of being recognized as an heir to God's kingdom and as a part of God's family. This is no distant relationship with an unconcerned potentate living far away. No, the spirit of God's own dear son lives in our own hearts enabling us to cry out the same word used by Jesus, the Aramaic word for father: Abba. That means, Paul tells us, that we are no longer just a slave as mentioned in verse 1. Now we are a child of God and an heir of the kingdom of God. We are blessed.

Questions for Reflection:

What are some things we can do to break down the racial, gender, and social barriers that separate people in our community? What are some things our church could do to break down these barriers?

Do you find it hard to believe that you are really God's child and blessed as an heir to God's kingdom? Have you lived with that sense of being blessed by someone? By your parents? By a teacher? By a colleague or boss? By God? And have you offered your blessing to someone else?