

Sunday, July 15, 2012  
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Continuing our study of Paul's letters, today we turn to Galatians. The exact location of Galatia is disputed by scholars, with most believing that the letter is addressed to several churches mentioned in today's reading from Acts.

This letter is dated somewhere between the year 48 and the mid 50's.

Paul's letter was written in the highly charged situation of battle with other rival missionaries for the hearts and minds of his Gentile Galatian converts.

He describes the situation with apocalyptic starkness: believers are part of the new creation and the law is irredeemably part of the old.

Paul sees the introduction of Jewish practices as a threat to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He fears the return to the old way of life, one dictated by law, rather than faith in Jesus Christ.

The reading is from Paul's letter to the Galatians 3:23-29.

### **Sermon – "One in Spirit"**

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I felt a kinship with Paul reading his letter to the Galatians.

The language reminded me of the United Church of Christ's statement of faith.

Paul is trying to make the point to the Gentiles of Galatia that they don't have to be something they are not to be loved by God.

They do not have to become Jewish to become Christian.

They do not have to be male to become Christian.

God's love is open and available to every created human being – there are no tests.

Our affirmation of faith sounds like Paul: (last page of hymnals)

"In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, he has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to himself."

Paul is making the point that Jesus died for our sins.

As we've heard in the other letters – the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ is the turning point from the old way to the new way.

Paul understood his apostolic call to be a commission to bring a law-free gospel to the Gentiles.

Their acceptability to God and their membership in the people of God did not depend on their adherence to the Jewish law.

Paul insists that righteousness means “right covenant relation with God.”

God’s promises to our biblical ancestors have been fulfilled through Jesus Christ and we come to righteousness by God’s grace, not by our own initiative.

It is perhaps difficult for us, too, to grasp the idea of grace.

We live in a culture that lauds hard work as a badge of honor.

We believe that the more effort we put into something, the greater chance of desired results.

One commentator shared a story about an instant cake mix that was a big flop.

The instructions said all you had to do was add water and bake.

The company couldn't understand why it didn't sell -- until their research discovered that the buying public felt uneasy about a mix that required only water.

Apparently people thought it was too easy.

So the company altered the formula and changed the directions to call for adding an egg to the mix in addition to the water.

The idea worked and sales jumped dramatically.

To some, the idea of God’s grace being available to all sounds too easy and simple to be true.

Paul’s followers in Corinth were swayed into believing that there was something more that they must do.

Paul’s message of grace was supplanted by the seemingly rational argument that they must follow Jewish practices to be accepted.

This made sense to the early Christians, because they, like us today, believed that they would be better off if they could physically show their commitment to God.

I don’t think it is the ‘work’ that people feel must go into a right relationship with God.

I think the challenge lies in the fact that relationship work is mostly internal.

If you are working on your relationship with God, no one may notice.

We are a society that likes to be noticed and recognized for our goodness.

Two years ago, when I was on the mission trip to Oaxaca, one participant kept requesting that we take her picture.

She wanted to make sure that everyone back at the church recognized what a good person she was.

Paul, however, says “I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”

Paul understands that his life is different now that faith has come. He has been transformed by the Spirit.

Our statement of faith says, “He bestows upon us his Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.”

Paul was perhaps one of the first to argue for an extravagant welcome in the church.

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female – for all are one.”

It pained Paul to hear that the Gentiles he had baptized into the church were falling prey to teachings that said they had to be circumcised to truly belong.

He argued against outward signs of commitment rather than heartfelt behaviors that demonstrated love of neighbor.

I am in complete agreement with Paul on this issue.

I firmly believe that God’s covenant with us is written on our hearts, we are born with knowledge of it.

We are called to live into that covenant, to find ways to emulate God’s love of us in our daily lives.

Again, our statement of faith:

He calls us into his church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be his servants in the service of all, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.”

We do this by embracing the Holy Spirit.

When we are guided in all that we do by the Spirit we become whole as disciples.

In chapter 5 Paul tells us that the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.

Those are not listed as multiple options – they are descriptions of the ‘fruit of the spirit.’ One.

When you let the spirit into your heart, you get all of those!

Paul makes the point that this transformation happens ‘in us’ not ‘by us.’

Righteousness is achieved not by our actions but by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit which enables one to live in accordance with God's will.

We can do what we ought to do because God's spirit is alive in us. And I promise you, when your life embodies the fruit of the spirit, people will notice.

Paul believed that one got into the people of God purely by grace, stayed in by obedience to law- obedience that was achieved through grace.

“He promises to all who trust him forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, his presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in his kingdom which has no end.”

God's promises, made to our ancestors, are ours today.

It is up to us to open our hearts to let the spirit in.

Let's take a look at what stands in our way.

### **Questions**

What 'works of the law' do we still look for today?

Is your faith enough to sustain you?

Do you find yourself trying to control things that are beyond your control?

Can you attest to the work of the Holy Spirit in your lives?

Let's share stories of the indwelling of the spirit.