

Worship Series: “Real Talk—Paul’s Letter to the Galatians”

4th Sunday after Pentecost

“Faith before Works”—Sermon Text: Galatians 2:15-21

FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

12 June 2016

Hear the day’s lesson:

15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; 16 yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. 17 But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not!

18 But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. 19 For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; 20 and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing (Galatians 2:15-21).

The tongues wagged. The word on Paul was devious stories about Paul’s relationship to Jesus’ apostles and the Jerusalem church. Paul’s answer to Galatian believers chronicles his own story. Paul’s autobiography starts his defense (apology) for preaching the gospel of salvation by grace. Chapter 2 of Galatians consists of two key connections. The first connection is that Peter and Paul hit upon an agreement. Peter goes to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles. But as we all know about great plans—they sometimes fail because we cannot always anticipate the unintended consequences. Here is a case of an “unintended consequence.”

An airline offered high mileage flyers a free flight for two and the unintended consequence followed. The airline followed up for public relations reasons on the free trip. They did so with a letter to the home address thanking the customer and hoping that they had a great time with their spouse. Unfortunately, customers who secretly took someone other than their spouse faced the dire and unintended consequences when they returned home.

What should Christian believers do in churches that contain both Jews and Gentiles? That is the second key connection noted in our text between Peter and Paul—and it was a disagreement. Paul’s words are: “When Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch” Paul presents this

topic to show how churches are compromised that operate with different rules for different groups. So Paul tells the Galatians that “I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned” (1:11).

The story then unfolds as Paul tells his story: “For before certain believers came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party” (1:12). Hebrew law did not forbid Jews from eating with Gentiles, but Jewish custom did (see Acts 11:3). Peter knew that this custom was not biblical, so he ignored it. Yet, when delegates from the Jerusalem church appeared, Peter altered his behavior. Peter wanted to please people and this was the very thing about which Paul’s opponents had accused him (1:10).

To eat separately implies that Gentiles were second-class citizens. In other words, Jewish Christians would not accept Gentiles unless they followed the ritual Jewish law. Paul understands that putting this regulation on Gentiles is a gospel breach. If God was willing to live in these people, then Jewish believers ought to be willing to eat with them. As the rest of our Galatian lesson demonstrates, one either earns salvation through works of the law—such as circumcision or following ritual law; or one is saved by grace. Thus Paul writes: “But when I saw that their conduct (the so called reputed pillars) was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews’ ” (v. 14)?

Soteria a Greek noun means: deliverance, preservation, safety, salvation, to save, heal, preserve, and to be (or make) whole. *SOZO* is the New Testament Greek word for salvation. *SOZO* is a verb that means to heal, cure, to make well; to rescue from danger, to save; to cause something to change to an earlier, correct, or appropriate state; to renew. This word and its meaning is what is at stake in this text.

Many Christians imagine “justification,” “salvation,” and so forth as words that signify something we possess. That is these words refer to what we own. Likewise, we frequently speak

about “faith” as if it were a thing or an object—something we have or possess. Yet in our New Testament these terms each refer to processes. These are things that we do, or what God and Jesus do for us. Fundamentally God gives us our life as a gift in Christ. Our part of God’s giving is to accept in faith our life and salvation as a gift. What we do and how we contribute to God’s realm is our expression of gratitude. We do not earn salvation nor are we justified by what we do—this is simply and clearly God’s doing for us. God offers salvation and we accept it as a gift. Our faith response demonstrates our seizure of so great a gift.

At times people think salvation is getting one’s ticket punched to heaven. Yet if we understand all the ways the New Testament speaks of salvation by faith we understand it as us God adopting us into the divine Kingdom/Realm in the future. But the New Testament also speaks of salvation as something that lives within us now. In another of Paul’s letters (1 Corinthians 15:1-2) he writes:

Now I would remind you, brothers/sisters, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

It is not merely the past event of Jesus’ crucifixion that we base our salvation upon or some future state of being as “in heaven.” Paul writes of salvation as happening now—“by which you are being saved.” Jesus says this: “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). We could look at salvation from a New Testament point of view as living in faith which includes past, present, and future. As a modern popular writer has it:

Salvation is a gift, and you don’t work for a gift. It’s free! You can’t earn it, you can’t buy it, and you can’t work for it. This is the fundamental difference between Christianity and every other religion. Christianity is the only religion that’s built on grace. Every other religion is based on works, and you can summarize them in one word: “do.” There are certain things you have to do in order to gain God’s approval, to gain bliss, to gain heaven. There are always rules, regulations, and rituals—something you have to do (Rick Warren, *DAILY HOPE DEVOTIONAL*, 5/21/14).

Many people in crisis ponder their journey to eternal life and often find the Christian message to be a message of hope. The Egyptian pyramids are among the most well-known structures in the world. We probably know that they served as burial chambers for the Pharaohs. But archaeologists report that preparation for death was also important in ordinary Egyptian society, not just for Pharaohs.

For the Egyptians the path to eternal life was full of dangers, demons, and false trails. One must be well prepared. The *Book of the Dead* provided instructions, tips, and incantations for the soul on its journey to the underworld. The book was often excerpted on coffins and tombs, or in the form of a complete scroll in the tomb.

The last ordeal on the path to eternity was the weighing of the deceased's heart. This would determine their fitness for joining the land of the gods. Applicants who passed were welcomed by Osiris; a too-heavy heart laden with evil was devoured by a monster and the spirit banished into darkness.

Christian faith, of course, sees death differently. The path to eternal life is not fraught with danger, but has been made simple and open by Christ. While our hearts may be weighed, it is not the degree of evil found within them that will matter but the presence of faith in Christ, who forgives all our sin and welcomes us into his presence (Source: from *Discovering Archaeology* website).