

Pleasant Ridge Presbyterian Church  
Cincinnati, Ohio  
Worship for 27 June 2010  
13<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Lectionary Year C

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New Testament Lectionary Reading: Galatians 3:23-29

Sermon: Walking Through Galatia/Going Beyond “Thou Shall Not”...

*Opening Prayer: Triune God...take the voice of a mere man and the desire for cohesive thought...breathe on them by your Spirit so the voice that we hear is the very voice of God through the written Word of God and that in hearing we might understand and in understanding we might obey...Amen.*

It is noted that Mao Zedong, the once political theorist and communist leader of the People's Republic of China, stated that, “All power comes from the end of a gun.” This might be illustrated best by the time that an elderly woman had just returned to her home from an evening of church services when she was startled by an intruder. She caught the man in the act of robbing her home of its valuables and yelled, “Stop! Acts 2:38! Repent and be baptized, in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven.”

The burglar stopped in his tracks. The woman calmly called the police and explained what she had done. As the officer cuffed the man to take him in, he was curious and asked the burglar, “Why did you just stand there? All the old lady did was yell a Scripture to you.”

“Scripture?” replied the burglar, “She said she had an ax and two 38s!”

There is a sense of power in the Word of God revealed to us in the Scriptures. Unlike the end of a gun though which learns over and over again that mankind cannot be governed long by sheer force, the imperatives that lie in the pages of this Holy Writ are exactly what caused the Apostle Paul to write to his protégé Timothy, “All Scripture is breathed out by God (*theopneustus*) and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” (2 Timothy 3:16) As Paul is in a Roman jail knowing that death was imminent, he charges Timothy to bring him three things: his cloak, his books, and

the parchments. His cloak to keep him warm (care for the body), his books to challenge his intellect (care for the mind), and the parchments to sustain his very life (care for the spirit). And just as it was for the Apostle Paul, the power of the parchments, the Word of God breathed for humanity becomes the gateway for us to have a personal, profound, and permanent encounter with the risen Christ where what we once were we no longer are.

As I stated a few weeks ago (where I was discussing birthright, borders, and bootstraps), this is not the result of lineage, being born in the right environment, hanging around church buildings, or the end of a gun barrel. It is because we have been ambushed by the Word of God, written and incarnate, to which we figure out the human predicament of sin and the fact that we need to be saved from that predicament.

Thus, Jesus becomes more than just a good example to follow, a teacher to learn from, a guru to discuss deep thoughts with, and a philosophical leader to give us wisdom. He becomes the Savior that saves us out of much (the reality of sin) and from much (the prospect of sin). As Paul stated to the church of Galatia taken from our Lectionary Reading for today, “For in Christ Jesus, you are all sons of God through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female. For you are one in Christ Jesus.” Because of this Word of God, all who have been justified (made right with God and each other) coming into that personal, profound, and permanent relationship with Jesus Christ are adopted into God’s family enjoying all the privileges, obligations, and inheritance rights of God’s children.

In our Lection for today though, there is another quandary of faith that arises that for our intents and purposes, often plays itself out (as far as I can tell) in opposite polarities of which neither are the Christian community called to. In dealing with the law of God that fills the landscape of the Scriptures, we either tend to dismiss it all together falling into what the great theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace” (“Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.”), or we enslave ourselves to it which often plays itself out in the posture of the self righteous: an excessive hypocritically pious “holier than thou” smug moral

superiority. To both of these ends, Paul recognizes the saving power of God's grace that comes solely through Jesus Christ ("the law was our guardian until Christ came") and Paul recognizes that because of this justification by faith, the law that was a guardian and a guide will naturally flow and be fulfilled in the life of a follower of Jesus Christ because when you are changed by God you naturally change the way you do things. This new life equals a new lifestyle. In other words, your identity denotes your activity. The reason that you do not lie, that you spend more time with your kids, that you give more money, and you pull your socks up is not based on the external but because of the internal. Show me a life like that of Christ and ask me to live it...well, I cannot. But if the reality of Christ lives in me, that is another story. "How you behave (fulfilling the law of God) is based on who you are and who you are is based on what God has done." (Alistair Begg)

The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Galatia, "Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith." What Paul is saying is that the law, functioning as guardian, had the positive tasks of highlighting and restraining transgressions as well as foretelling the coming of the Christ. The law was a baseline of order set by the Creator of the universe. This was in total opposition to the pagan gods of this day that did as they pleased with human beings, regardless of justice. As Hesiod wrote of the chief of the Greek gods, "Zeus rules the world, and with resistless sway, takes back tomorrow what he grants today." To quote Russell Kirk in his book *The Roots of American Order*, "The Law was not a punishment or an oppressive burden imposed upon the people: on the contrary, it was the precious gift of Jehovah by which Israel might exist in justice. The law of Jehovah was the means for living with one's self and living with one's neighbors; it was the means for regaining order in the soul and in the community."

The Law of God though, as Paul recognized, was not an end unto itself. The law might have exposed sin and idolatry at all levels uncovering rebelliousness against God's will. "The law did not have the power, however, to make people holy. It was not a remedy for sin; its work was diagnostic. It could be obeyed but it did not seal within hearts a love for God and neighbor." (Robert Bryant) All the moral laws in the

world cannot change the heart of man. The Mosaic Law had 613 commandments of which ten of them were the Decalogue given at Mount Sinai. David was able to reduce it to 15 laws. Micah was able to reduce it to three. Jesus himself was able to reduce it to 1A and 1B. Even looking beyond the Biblical worldview and peering through the lens of other faiths and philosophies, we find the code of Hammurabi that has 282 laws, Islam that has the five pillars, Buddhism that has the eight fold path, and Hinduism that has the purusharthas. Despite the worldviews, despite the codes and the paths, despite the pillars and the laws, none of this has the power to change the heart of man. The day that General McArthur received the surrender from the Japanese on the bright sunlit morning in Tokyo Bay he stated, “If we have not learned from this war, the next one will be too late.” He went on to say, “If we are going to have to rescue the flesh, we are going to have to work on the spirit.”

All of this culminates, as it did for the churches in Galatia, a rethinking and a possible reordering of our theology. For the Galatians, rethinking their theology meant seeing that there has been an appropriate purpose for the law – namely to train Israel in its preparation for the Messiah. “The law served as a tutor, a gift from God to guide the people of Israel until they came of age to receive their full inheritance when Christ came. The law was given to prepare Israel for Christ’s coming.” (Bryant) As I stated before, the law had no saving power; preparing power maybe, but not saving power. The churches in Galatia had to realize that those among them who had been justified (made right with God and each other) coming into that personal, profound, and permanent relationship with Jesus Christ were adopted into God’s family enjoying all the privileges, obligations, and inheritance rights of God’s children. Because of this, their focus had to shift from following the letter of the law (an external reality) to loving and serving the Lawgiver who dwelled within (the internal reality). In taking heart concerning the internal, the end result is that the external took care of itself. This is what is meant when Christ says in Matthew 5:17, “Do you think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

And where our theology must often be rethought and reordered is, as I had mentioned before, in consideration for the two polarities of either “cheap grace” or enslavement to the point of self

righteousness. We are not to dismiss the law of God lest we preach “forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession...grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.” All you are left with is something to the effect of: I think that you should believe in Jesus...it is fun...I think it might help you...I think you would like it. Looking good and feeling good replaces being good and doing good.

To take this in the opposite direction, we are not to become enslaved to the law lest we become excessively hypocritical pious “holier than thou” smug moral superior schmuck. It was the great preacher Charles Spurgeon who said. “The greatest enemy to human souls is the self-righteous spirit which makes men look to themselves for salvation.” What we learn is that the hardest people to reach with the love of God are not the law breakers. They know who they are and they have no defense. The self-righteous spirit though often considers itself above the law even though it is enslaved to it.

Instead of all of this, we are meant to recognize what Paul recognized. “God has intervened in our lives, shown us our predicament, brought us to Himself through the power of His Son, died for our sins, raised for our justification, sent His Spirit to live within our lives, and we are then able to say I understand.”

(Begg) Our Christianity is based not on who I am or upon what I do but it is based on who Jesus is and what He has done. We end up knowing who we are because we discover who He is. And as a result, the evidence of that transformation is given in the life that we lead. It becomes a matter of loving the Lawgiver to which following the law then becomes a natural occurrence. The desire of the heart ends up matching the discipline of the life.

I was going to leave you with a hearty explanation about the philosophical differences between Kantian Ethics (Emmanuel Kant: the stars above and the law within) which basically states that we are ethical people following the law out of duty and force where Aristotelian Ethics (Aristotle: We are what we repeatedly do) states that we are ethical people following the law because of a virtuous heart that takes great joy in doing so. Instead I want to leave you with a conversation that I had with our son Aidan that I think incarnates those differences.

There is a children's book entitled *Your Personal Penguin* by Sandra Boynton that we read together almost every night now. There was one exception to this a few evenings ago where father and son had a slight disagreement about bedtime practices (Thou shall not!) and *Your Personal Penguin* was not read out of punishment. This is the point where Mom intervened and did what only a mom can do which was to calm the storms of a crying child while explaining why Daddy did what he did. It was the next day that Aidan came to me, gave me a big hug, and with the smile that only one's child can deliver stated, "Today Daddy, I can be good for you."

Today Daddy, I can be good for you. Is that not what this entire sermon really boils down to? Today God...because of what you have done for me in Jesus Christ, I can be good for You. I can follow the law today. I have the desire to. I have the freedom to. Today God, I can be good for You.

In the name of the Triune: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen.