

INTRODUCTION

Galatians is written to a group of Christians who were straying from the grace-way. They replaced grace with rule-keeping. We need laws and rules. I'm glad we have the law of gravity, or we'd all fly off into space. And, of course, we need speed limit laws for public safety. I can only imagine some of the excuses that policemen have heard when they pull someone over for speeding. One of my Alabama friends was a state trooper and his favorite story was about the time he pulled over a sweet little lady. He said, "Ma'am, did you know you were going 65 miles an hour?" She said, "That's ridiculous, sonny, I haven't even been GONE an hour!" He laughed so hard, that he only gave her a warning.

Mahatma Gandhi is considered the Father of modern India. His birthday, October 2, is a national holiday in the second-most populated nation on earth. In 1891, after graduating law school in London, he moved to South Africa to practice law. The racial system of apartheid was strictly observed in South Africa. Gandhi was fascinated with truth and studied the Bible along with other religious texts. He loved the Sermon on the Mount and seriously considered becoming a Christian. One Sunday he decided to visit a church in South Africa. Gandhi's skin was light brown and as he entered the church a South African man said with a belligerent tone, "Where do you think you're going kaffir?" ("Kaffir" was a racial slur, like our "n" word.) Gandhi replied, "I'd like to attend worship here." The man said, "There's no room for kaffirs here. Get out of here, or I'll have some of my men throw you down the steps." Gandhi never seriously considered becoming a Christian again. This incident might have been one reason he would later make the famous quote: "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

Who knows what India would have been like today if Gandhi had been welcomed into church that day and given his life to Christ? We'll never know, Gandhi rejected Christ because of the discriminatory practices of those "Christians" in South Africa. But before we're harsh on them, I wonder how much damage has been done right here in America, especially in the South, by Christians who never came to understand this revolutionary truth from the Bible: "The Ground is Level at the Foot of the Cross."

Galatians 3:26-29. "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

A few verses earlier Paul recounted an incident that happened at the church in Antioch. The church in Antioch had both Jews and Gentiles (a Gentile was anyone who wasn't a Jew). One day Simon Peter visited Antioch from Jerusalem, and even though he was a Jew, he ate with Gentiles, and even enjoyed a few pork chops. However, when some Jewish Christians from the church in Jerusalem visited, Peter changed his tune. Suddenly he refused to eat with lowly Gentiles, and he enforced the dietary laws of the Old Testament. Paul confronted Peter to his face, to both of his faces, actually. Then Paul devotes the rest of this letter reminding them that salvation is by grace alone.

The Old Testament gave favored status to the Jews and considered Gentiles unclean. But the New Testament teaches that the ground is level at the foot of the cross. Let’s learn three truths from this powerful passage:

I. WHEN YOU ARE IN CHRIST, YOU ARE A FAVORED CHILD OF GOD

Notice how Paul used phrase “in Christ” or “with Christ.” He wrote, “You are all sons of God through faith IN CHRIST JESUS.” That’s one of Paul’s favorite phrases. He used it 83 times in his thirteen letters.

Paul mixed his metaphors when he wrote, “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” He wasn’t talking about water baptism here. The word “baptize” means to “immerse.” We may say someone in college is “immersed in their studies.” That means they are so consumed by their classwork they have little time to think about anything else. When you are immersed into Jesus, He consumes your thoughts.

Baptism speaks of our immersion into Christ, but clothing speaks of our identification with Christ. When we’re clothed with Christ we show others whose team we’re on. Let’s imagine NFL Quarterback Peyton Manning signs with the Miami Dolphins next week. But next fall when he runs on the field for his first game he’s still wearing his Indianapolis Colts uniform. Could you imagine the reaction of the fans? They’d say, “Change your uniform or go back to Indy!” When we become a Christian we no longer wear the garments of the world, we put on the righteousness of Christ.

The picture he paints here is that in Christ we are a favored child, a son. Remember, in Bible times a daughter didn’t receive any inheritance from her Father. That’s why Paul uses this male-child image. Whether you’re a male or female follower of Jesus, you have the full rights of a son, the favored child.

In many other places the Bible uses the term “children of God.” And the Bible makes it clear God has both sons and daughters. “I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters,” says the Lord Almighty. (2 Corinthians 6:18)

Contrary to popular belief, not everyone on planet earth is a child of God. Everyone is created by God; but not everyone is a child of God—only those who place their faith in Jesus can be called the Children of God. There isn’t ONE family on this planet; Jesus said there are two families and two fathers. Speaking to Pharisees He said, “You belong to your father, the devil.” (John 8:44) So you’re either part of the God’s family, or the family of the evil one.

Are you enjoying your relationship with God as your Father? Do you understand how great His love is for you? We keep pictures of our kids and grandkids on the refrigerator. God loves you so much that if He had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it.

Parents, have you noticed when we go to an event where our kids are participating, we really only watch our kids? And a good dad isn’t critical, they’re proud. Your kid may be on the sidelines or the bench instead of on the field or on the court, but we’re going to be watching

them. There may be thirty little girls out there for the dance recital, but our eyes (and our video cameras) are focused on our kids. And if they happen to make a tackle, or a free throw, or perform a beautiful grand plié, we want to tell everybody, "That's my boy!" "That's my girl!"

That's how our Heavenly Father watches over us with love and compassion. As the song based on the words of Jesus promises, "If His eye is on the sparrow, I know He watches over me!"

II. WHEN YOU ARE IN CHRIST, YOU HAVE FULL EQUALITY WITH ALL OTHER BELIEVERS

Some theologians have called Galatians 3:28 the Christian Magna Carta. The Bible says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one IN CHRIST JESUS."

Paul probably chose these three categories as an intentional slap in the face of the Jewish teachers in Galatia who were proud of their religion, race, and gender. Every morning a good Jewish man would pray: "God, I thank you that you did not make me a Gentile, a slave, or a woman."

As Islam spreads around the world, we need to be aware of its beliefs. When I visited Saudi Arabia a couple of years ago, I was surprised to discover how women were treated. They can't vote, or even drive a car. When I visited a mall that was as modern as anything in Dallas, the men were all dressed in a variety of clothing, sitting around drinking coffee and smoking. But the women were forced to wear black clothing that covered every part of their body except for a tiny slit for their eyes.

I shouldn't have been so surprised because the Koran says, "Men have authority over women because God has made the one superior to the other, and because men spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because God has guarded them. As for those among you who fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them." (Sura 4:34)

In every culture, and every religion, including Christianity, the human tendency has been to build walls between groups of people. The message is, "Don't you cross my wall, and I won't cross your wall." Jesus didn't come to build walls, He came to tear down the walls that the world has built to separate people into man-made groups. The Bible says, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility." (Ephesians 2:13-14)

Jesus isn't saying that there aren't any differences between people. Yes, we may have different colored skin. Yes, we might have different jobs, and positions of leadership. And yes, there are differences between men and women. But IN CHRIST these differences don't define who we are. The only two categories that really matter in the world are: Are you IN CHRIST, or not? At the cross, Jesus destroyed all the man-made barriers of hostility. Notice three walls of hostility that Jesus destroyed.

A. The cross bridges racial division

In Christ there is “neither Jew nor Greek.” The false teachers in Galatia were telling the Gentile Christians they had to become Jews first before they could become Christians. But Paul struck back by saying Jesus’ grace is for every race! God doesn’t love you any more or any less based upon your racial background. As we sang as children, “Jesus loves the little children; all the children of the world. Red and yellow black and white they are precious in His sight.”

You can be a Jew, a Greek, a Filipino, a Bolivian, or a Russian, and God still loves you. You might even be a “Heinz 57” mixture like most of us probably are, and that doesn’t exclude you from God’s grace. The ground is level at the foot of the cross.

This verse also speaks of national barriers. Paul could have said, “There are no Americans, Chinese, Ethiopians, or Brazilians. We are all one in Christ Jesus.” Of course, we have boundaries and barriers between nations. We’re Americans, and we’re proud of it, but our primary identity is who we are in Christ. For instance, I’m a 59- year old white American male. But I feel a closer bond with a 75-year old female Nigerian Christian than I do with another white male American my age who isn’t a follower of Jesus Christ. Why? Because our main source of identity comes from who we are in Christ.

B. The cross bridges social division

In Christ there is “neither slave nor free.” When you read about slaves in the New Testament, don’t think about slaves in the South before the Civil War. In the Roman Empire, it was a common practice to bring the educated, skilled citizens of conquered nations to work for the Roman citizens. Historians believe one-third of the population of the Roman Empire were slaves. Slaves couldn’t own property or conduct business. In almost every other social setting in the Roman Empire, the slaves and free citizens didn’t mix openly. It was an economic and a social wall separating them.

The only place where this was different was in the church. Here, slaves and free citizens worshipped side by side. The closest parallel we have today would be the “haves” and the “have-nots.” There are places in the U.S. where you can’t enter unless you have a certain social or economic standing. But the church is a place where the doors are open to everyone, regardless of your economic or social standing. That’s what I love about Green Acres. Nobody has to produce a net worth statement to join the church. We have millionaires praising the Lord next to people who are currently unemployed. We have the Neiman Marcus crowd right next to the Wal-Mart crowd. And we have the Dollar Store crowd right next to the Dillard’s crowd.

The American Civil War divided a nation, as well as families. It also divided the church in America. Two months after the war ended, members of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Richmond were gathered for worship. At the end of the message, the pastor invited the worshippers to approach the altar to receive communion. To the great shock and consternation of the congregation, the first man to walk forward was a stranger, a black man. Outraged, none of the other worshippers left their seats. After a few moments, a dignified white man could be seen walking down the aisle to the communion rail. He knelt beside the black man to receive

communion. His name was Robert E. Lee. After General Lee came down the other members of the church moved forward for communion. Robert E. Lee believed that there is neither free nor slave, for we are one in Christ Jesus. I think we should name a high school after him or something, don’t you?

C. The cross bridges gender division

In Christ there is “neither male nor female.” This doesn’t say there isn’t a difference between male and female, it says there should be no division or hostility between males and females.

In Genesis the Bible says, “In the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27) Men and women ARE different physically (we have different chromosomes). The Bible calls the woman “the weaker sex.” That just means most men can beat most women in arm wrestling. Of course, in my BodyPump class about half the women there could beat me! Women are different emotionally. Experiments have shown they think with both sides of their brain whereas most men are left-brained. And the fact that every woman knows what I mean by that and hardly any of the men have a clue just proves my point.

But I’m glad men and different, aren’t you? I say, “Vive la difference!” Maybe you’ve seen this list of five ways men and women think differently: (1) A man will pay \$10 for a \$5 item he needs. A woman will pay \$5 for a \$10 item she doesn’t need, because it’s on sale. (2) A man has five items in his bathroom: a toothbrush, razor, shaving cream, soap, and a comb. A woman has an average of 328 items in her bathroom—most of which a man can’t identify. (3) Women always have the last word in an argument. Anything a man adds after that is the beginning of a new argument. (4) When three men eat out and the bill is \$44.95 each tosses a \$20 bill on the table. When three women eat out and the bill is \$44.95, out come the calculators. (5) A woman knows everything about her children—their best friends; their hopes, dreams, and fears; and their dentist appointments. A man is vaguely aware of short people living in the house.

Perhaps you’ve heard of the “gender wars.” It’s the notion that there is an ongoing conflict between men and women. A sociology professor in college was trying to prove men and women think differently. On the board he wrote a sentence without punctuation: (woman without her man is a savage) He asked the class to add punctuation. The men all wrote: “Woman, without her man, is a savage.” In other words, they believed that any woman without a man was a savage. But the woman punctuated the sentence this way: “Woman! Without her, man is a savage!” And so the gender wars continue.

Have you ever noticed in Orthodox Jewish synagogues and Muslim mosques, the men and women are separated for worship? The false teachers in Galatia were trying to bring back that division. They wanted the men to sit on one side and the women on the other, just like in a synagogue. But that’s one of the beautiful things about a church. Men and women, old and young, worshipping side-by-side. The New Testament elevates the role of women. Women were the last at the cross and the first at the tomb.

One hot day Jesus sat at a well. There was a woman there and Jesus broke every racial, gender, and religious rule in effect at the time. Jews didn’t talk to Samaritans; there was a religious and a

national wall there. And just like in Saudi Arabia today, a strange man would NEVER speak to a woman. There was a social wall. And this woman was living in sin with a man who wasn't her husband. There was a moral wall that separated them. But Jesus knocked the walls down and offered her living water. Why? Because in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek; slave nor free; male nor female.

3. WHEN YOU ARE IN CHRIST YOU ARE BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING

Paul wrote, "If you BELONG TO CHRIST, you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." Sometime when a pastor talks about "receiving your inheritance" some people sigh and say, "Yeah, I've heard it before. I know. I'm a Christian, so I'm going to heaven one day. When I die I'll claim my inheritance." You can almost hear them thinking, "Boooooorrrring." Some people think the Gospel is "pie in the sky by and by." Well, it is that, but it's more. It's also "steak on your plate while you wait."

An inheritance isn't for a dead person; it's FROM a dead person! When my mom died twenty-eight years ago, I received a small amount of money from her estate, as did my brother and sister. I didn't have to wait until I died to claim it. I claimed it when *she* died. And I only received 1/3 of the inheritance. But in Christ, the Bible says, we are heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ. That means that the inheritance isn't divided among all of God's children. We each receive the full amount of the promise.

So what is it that we inherit from Abraham? Just go back and read what God said to Abraham four thousand years ago. "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing...all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:2-3)

God's promise to Abraham involved the birth of a son, Isaac. But that wasn't the main promise; it was the means to the fulfillment of the Promise. God's promise was to bless Abraham. He did that, but Abraham and his descendants forgot the rest of the promise. They were blessed so that *all the nations of the earth* would be blessed. The nation of Israel circled their wagons and became self-centered. They took on an us-against-the-world stance. Their prayer became "bless me, bless me, bless me." They forgot their responsibility to be a blessing.

When we were in Israel a few weeks ago, we visited both the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee is fresh water, and teeming with fish and waterfowls. The Dead Sea is, well, dead. Nothing lives in it. What's the difference? The Sea of Galilee receives water and then shares its water. The Jordan River flows out of the Sea of Galilee and provides fresh water for thousands of acres of farmland. That water eventually flows into the Dead Sea. But the Dead Sea has no outlet. It only receives; it never GIVES.

People are the same way. God never designed you to be a Dead Sea person, only receiving His blessings. He designed you to be a Sea of Galilee person; constantly giving, because He has given to you. Never become a blessing receptacle, be a channel of blessing to others!

CONCLUSION

Chances are you’ve seen, or heard of, the movie “Lawrence of Arabia,” starring Peter O’Toole. It’s based on a true story. T. E. Lawrence was a dashing British soldier in World War I who united the Arab tribes and led them in battle against the Turks, who were aligned with the Germans.

After the Allied victory, Lawrence was invited to Paris to participate in the peace talks. He took with him several of the Arab leaders who stayed in the same hotel. These desert dwellers had never seen indoor plumbing before. They were amazed that when they turned on the faucet to the bathtub that it filled up with water. They thought it was magic.

After the peace talks were completed the delegation was preparing to leave. Lawrence was surprised to discover his Arab friends had removed the faucets from their bathtubs and had packed them in their luggage. They assumed that the faucets themselves were magic and had produced the water.

Lawrence explained that the faucets didn’t produce the water. They were connected to pipes, which were connected to a source of fresh water. Once they were disconnected from that source, they were just empty fixtures.

What a powerful parable of the Christian life! People who find their identity in their religion, race, rank, or keeping rules are like disconnected faucets. But our true worth is found because of our connection with Jesus Christ. If you’re not connected to Jesus Christ, then you’re cut off from the source of life. Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:7)

The ground is level at the foot of the cross. There’s no room for us to feel any sense of superiority over anyone else. But it also means *anyone* can come to the cross. The ground is level; there is no religious mountain of rules and regulations you have to climb. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. You don’t have to have any special status or position to come to Jesus. There’s an old hymn that says: “The ground is level at the foot of the cross. Anyone may come for there is no cost. Rich man or poor man, bonded or free. The ground was leveled that day at Calvary.”

All you need is an invitation. God’s invitation is repeated throughout the Bible. But so you wouldn’t miss it, He made one final invitation to you on the very last page of His Book.

He said, “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come!’ Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.” (Revelation 22:17)

OUTLINE

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"I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters," says the Lord Almighty. *2 Corinthians 6:18*

II. YOU HAVE FULL EQUALITY WITH ALL OTHER BELIEVERS

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- B. The cross bridges social division
- C. The cross bridges gender division

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes