

“In Christ”: Who Is It?

10.15.17

Galatians 3:1-7



Reflection questions... [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

“What do you say?” If you are a parent (or, you had parents), did you ever use this expression to help develop the quality of gratitude in your children? How do you understand the importance of thankfulness as it relates to our Christian Story? As it impacts and effects our relationships and interactions?”

“If, by definition, grace is a gift, why do you think it’s so hard for us to receive? When someone expresses gratitude toward you, do you find it difficult to simply say, ‘thanks’? Do you find that you need to somehow qualify your efforts?”

Here are some thoughts for your consideration, as it relates to covenant [you may not be able to get to all of this, as a group, but perhaps you could give it some attention this week]:

In ancient settings, a covenant was a means of establishing and outlining the relationship between a King and his people. When a conquering nation would occupy a territory, they would be presented with a **Suzerain-Vassal** (Lord-Servant) agreement.

Historians identify the rehearsal of the Law in Deuteronomy as just such an agreement: (Deuteronomy 6-8)

- ◆ Preamble: Introduction of the parties involved.

- ◆ Rehearsal of the King’s benevolent deeds: recounted the history of the relationship between the (2) parties. It would usually emphasize how gracious and kind the great king had been to the servant king (in the Near East, a nicer way of talking about oppression and exploitation). In Deuteronomy, it rehearses God’s faithfulness to Israel.

- ◆ Stipulations of the covenant: required loyalty and the blessings that one could expect if they lived by the covenant and the curses which would be a consequence of disobedience. It was basically outlining an appropriate response of the servant.

- ◆ Provisions made for future generations to realize the blessing of the covenant. Treaties were always made with a view toward the future.

- ◆ The covenant treaty (‘law’) was to be preserved and kept in the most sacred place of the servant nation--- “under the feet” of the suzerain’s god (for the Jews, in the ark of the covenant, kept in the Holy of Holies).

“Why do you think it is important to remember that the ‘exodus’ came before the ‘giving of the Law’? If not, what would we conclude to be true of the rescue? Of the law?”

Read Jeremiah 31:31-37 and Ezekiel 37:26. "How was this 'new' covenant anticipated by these Old Testament writers? What was unique about it?"

- According to Jeremiah, there would come a time when God would make a "new covenant" (renewed):
 - Laws written, not on tablets of stone, but on their hearts (his desires would be ours because his life in us is in the process of shaping us into the kind of people who routinely follow his heart).
 - He will be our God and we will be his people (image restored; return to the unobstructed freedom of relationship for which we were designed).
 - Forgiveness and a hopeful future (removal of any obstacle to relationship; refusal to use our sins against us).

"How do Christ's words in 1 Corinthians 11:25 connect his ministry to the Old Testament concept of the new covenant?"

Teaching Notes...

Grace is, first, a word about God then, and only then, is it a word about us.

Acts 20:24 "... the work assigned to me by the Lord Jesus... to tell others the good news about the wonderful grace of God".

charis (Greek)- a gift of good-will; to be well; to flourish; that which promotes gratitude; that which affords delight, favor of the merciful kindness by which God, exerting his holy influence upon souls, turns them to Christ.

Grace: the unprovoked, self-initiated movement of God toward and in us which both invites and incites transformation.

Grace is God's disposition--- the way he 'carries himself' which helps to eliminate any hesitancy we might have in approaching him, but we are already aware of his movements toward us.

Grace possesses a unique ability, for those who allow themselves to experience it, to radically alter its environment. It is to receive favor (to have another delight in you) and then be able to receive others (delight in others) in ways that are less demanding and conditional.

In the text, Paul is writing to gatherings of people in the region of Galatia, who didn't "grow up in a Christian home" (there was no such thing, at the time), but were finding themselves attracted to and compelled by the message of Jesus and the lifestyle of his followers.

These folks (referred to as "Gentiles") were being pressured that if they wanted to be full, card-carrying members of God's family (aka, "*children of Abraham*"), they, too, must accept the rituals and customs which distinguish Judaism, which would, in turn: 1) identify them with the law (badge; identity marker) and 2) obligate them to keep it all (5:2).

I suppose that if you were being informed and formed by a religious expression that held to any number of prescribed observances (pilgrimages, festivals, holy-days, dietary practices, circumcision-- - #thisisgoingtostingabit, ---etc.), it would be easy for you to confuse **“this is what I do because of who I am”** and **“this is what I am because of what I do”**.

Paul begins by reminding the folks in Galatia about how they arrived at this place, *“in Christ”*: *“Did you receive the Holy Spirit by obeying the Law of Moses?”*

Law and grace, Paul says, cannot co-exist. It’s an “either-or”, not a “both-and”, proposition.

Paul said that he painted such a vivid word picture of Jesus as crucified, it was as if they were there, personally. That imagery was not meant to simply coerce an emotional response based on the horrific details surrounding Jesus’ death, but was meant to center them *“in Christ”*. You were being asked to stand before the complexities and ugliness and beauty of the cross and re-think your understanding of God.

God always and only relates with us ‘covenantally’.

As a people, the Jews trace their identity back to a special relationship into which God had entered with Abram. A covenant with, not simply a person, but a person representing a people... a nation.

That relationship was regularly referred to as a **‘covenant’**, or **‘testament’**. It differs, in a number of ways, from what we would recognize as a ‘contract’, but most significantly in that in a contract, (2) parties agree to a deal. *“I’ll give you _____ (provide this service), if you will _____”*. **“I will if you will”**. If you don’t, there are any number of law offices being advertised which would gladly take my case on contingency.

Covenant..

...is a loving-relationship made even more binding and secure due to its promises and expectations.

... always creates an atmosphere of security and significance. Covenant says, *“I choose you. You belong with me and I will not be content until you know and are transformed by that love.”*

... says, in essence, **“I will, even if you don’t. I AM, even if you’re not.”**

...means that the relationship being formed is already stronger than the wrongs committed against it. Therefore, you can live in love, not fear.

Most often, the best we can muster is: *“I promise to love and cherish you as long as you are loveable and cherishable... or until dissatisfaction do us part!”*

Conversely, a covenant pledge sounds more like this: *“I promise to love you and to be faithful to you... even if you are not! I promise to be who I should be even if you are not who you should be.”*

So, in light of this image of “human wreckage” in Genesis 1-11, we are offered in **Genesis 15** this bizarre, yet commonly accepted ancient ritual. It says...

Get some animals.

Kill them and cut them in half (unbeknownst to the SPCA).

Lay them out in such a way that you create some kind of bloody walkway between them.

Get your covenant partner and stand at the entry of the walkway and review the nature of the promises and commitments you are making to each other.

Then, casually stroll between the dead, rotting pieces of the animal carcass and say something like: *"If I don't make good on my promises, may I end up like this animal"*. [This is where the phrase, *"to cut a deal"*, originates.]

This is, most historians and theologians believe, is what we are witnessing in Genesis 15, with one really subversive spin: the other covenant partner is God!

This story challenges convention, in that, humanity sacrificed to the gods in order that you might get them to notice you, and to coerce them into responding favorably to you. In this Story, it is God who initiates relationship. It is God who makes promises based on his own unprovoked posture of favor. Faithfulness.

Abraham, for his part, *"... believes God, and he credited it to him as righteousness."* He doesn't believe in God (based on some pretty dramatic displays), he believes (trusts) God.

"credited as righteousness": accounted (from 'logos': to declare)- put to one's account; to confer a status on another that was not there previously.

Those who "believe God" are the only ones who can live righteously.

The righteous status is not the result of his actions, but his willingness to simply believe in and respond to the righteous movements of this God toward him.

The righteous life is only possible as we trust what God says about us and re-align ourselves with his evaluation and not our failed attempts at living acceptably.

The change of status (the conferred identity) is to transform the lifestyle. Anything other would be dependent upon our efforts, not God's.

So, we arrive at the cross but, somehow, we weren't ready for Jesus. We weren't ready for a God who was so deferential and self-sacrificing, but we realize, now, that there's nothing left to fear. No reason to 'not' trust.

The biographers are all suggesting that what we have been watching, in often encrypted ways, is God himself, taking on skin, meeting us at the place of our pain and ruin and suffering--- and actually taking it upon himself so that we might experience the life for which we were created. This is God making good on his promises. This is God winning back our trust.

Paul is not attempting to now tell them a 'new story', with this new 'twist in the plot' involving Jesus, but telling the Story in a way that clearly is fixing Jesus as its apex. As its fulfillment (Hebrews 1).

I think it is not until we are able to see the cross as an undiluted expression of grace--- only to be recognized and received, not earned--- that we are changed deeply by it.

As we "gaze" at the suspended Jesus, it seems that the cross asks much more of God than of us.

In some fashion, what Jesus experienced on the cross, must eventually happen within us: questioning, mourning, the experience of darkness, surrender, death, life with an 'eternal' quality to it.

"As you arrive at the scene, what do you conclude to be true of God? What do you conclude to be true of the world? Is this an act of evil or an act of good? How is God using this as a means of overcoming evil?"

“Given such a pure expression of selflessness, is there a calling to some specific act of generosity, in response?”

“Given such a dramatic example of redemptive suffering, is there a situation in which God might be using your present pain and adversity to heal and restore another?”

“Given such a remarkable portrayal of forgiveness, is there any justification for our continued resentment and bitterness toward another?”