

The Epistles of Paul

Week 4: Galatians

Purpose:

Along with Romans likely the most theologically influential of Paul's letters, the Epistle to the Galatians deepens the discussion surrounding new Christian practice and the continued influence of the Law. Our study today focuses on Paul's challenge to the community to not go back, but to instead look forward to the new promises of Christ who sets the world free.

1. Have you read Galatians before? Have you studied it? What did you think?
2. What is oppression? How does Jesus free us from oppression?
3. Why do you think there was continued debate regarding The Law and Torah?

Key Verse(s) of the Week, Galatians 3:28-29

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."

Opening Prayer:

Gracious Lord, you who has pulled us out of the mire and called us into your grace, lead us now in sharing in your word. Help us be inspired and follow in your way. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Introduction and Background:

Paul had likely started the community mentioned here in the early 50s, before going to Ephesus or Corinth. However, there is substantial debate regarding exactly which area of Galatia the church was located. There is also debate regarding whether Galatians was written in the late 40s or mid-50s CE. However, these debates do not change our discussion today.

The church was almost entirely Gentile and had no previous connection to Judaism. Paul started the community in that spirit, focusing on the nature of Jesus, his ministry, and how they could follow Jesus. However, following his departure, Paul hears word of now other early Christian missionaries visiting the community, now encouraging the community to follow in Jewish practice as well.

Paul's letter today pushes back on this new movement within the Galatian community. Rather than just telling them "no", Paul directly challenges the theology of taking on these practices. While the overarching belief was that following the Law helped make you a descendant of Abraham, Paul states that if they have faith in Jesus they have already been adopted into the family and do not need to follow these other practices.

1. Why do you think there was such a large debate regarding Gentile and Jewish Christians?
2. Is the theological argument more effective? Why or why not?
3. Assuming the letter comes from the late 50s, how does this show the heightening tension between Gentile and Jewish Christians?

Today's Focus Passage, Galatians 3:19-29

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained through angels by a mediator. ²⁰Now a mediator involves more than one party; but God is one. ²¹Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law. ²²But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

23 Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

1. What is the main point of this passage?
2. How does Jesus' connection to Abraham matter to the community?
3. How do we embrace freedom in Christ? What does it mean to be "set free"?

Discussion:

The importance of this passage and underlying theology to the growth of the Christian movement can not be understated. Much of the lineage we claim as non-Jewish Christians is found here in Galatians 3. Rather than simply encourage the community, Paul directly engages the theology of following the Jewish Law. He does not dismiss it, but rather points to the nature of Jesus' ministry and loving sacrifice, connecting the death and resurrection of Jesus as having adopted those who have faith into the family of God. While this seems obvious to us now, this was an unanswered question in early Christianity.

Moreover, Paul pushes even further, stating that in Jesus there are no partitions or levels. This is a revolutionary statement. In a faith context, this places all persons at equal level who have faith in Jesus. Do not misunderstand, however, regarding these statements. This does not undo the oppression and injustice of the world. Rather, this is a call to continue to share the message of Jesus so that the world may reflect the same promises of faith.

1. How is this passage hopeful? Why do you think it made such an impact?
2. How can we sometimes ignore oppression? What should our response be?
3. Do we have some of the same discussions today? What do they look like?

Conclusion:

The Epistle to the Galatians has had a profound impact on Christian theology. In pushing back against another group of missionaries, Paul points to the redeeming act of Jesus. This act was not simply about sin, but for the redemption of the world and the adoption of people into the family of God. For the early community, having an almost exclusive gentile background, this was an ultimate inclusive statement. You are included! You are brought in because of your faith in Jesus.

Close in prayer