

Wednesday, October 14, 2020

SERIES: WE ARE FREE (A Study of Galatians)

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TITLE: Acceptance

Acceptance. Have you ever considered how important it is to be accepted? I went to a Christian school – Kindergarten through 12th grade. I loved my school. The friendships were strong – so strong that they even exist today. You could say that I was accepted by my peers, and that meant the world to me. But I remember one semester in 6th grade, where I decided to transfer to a different school. I don't remember all the details why, but I thought it was time for a change. That was really unusual for me, but I thought let's give it a try, and do something different. So for about four months, I attended a school down the street. It was Christian as well, but I never felt accepted. Now there are many reasons why that may be true, but immediately when I returned back to Lincoln Christian School, I got the high fives; I got the hugs. I knew I was where I belonged.

The Apostle Paul was also faced with the challenge of acceptance. The people who loved him and embraced him at the beginning of his life and career, immediately rejected him, *and* his message, once he met the risen Christ. It didn't matter how much he knew his old friends. It didn't matter how much influence he had over them; the reality is, his eyes were opened, his message had changed, and he was no longer accepted. The Apostle Paul was so focused on his acceptance from God, he really wasn't that concerned about the acceptance of men. And in the process of becoming a church planter and a messenger of the Gospel, Paul did interact with some pretty important people, whose acceptance carried some weight. Who are these people? What was this acceptance all about? That's what we're going to find out as we turn back to the Bible - to Galatians Chapter Two.

In case you're listening for the first time, or haven't listened for a while, I want to welcome you back, because we're in a series called "We are Free". The Apostle Paul was freed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You too, if you are a child of God, have been freed. But yesterday we wrestled with the idea that if we are free, then let's be sure to *live* as free. After all, what's the point of freedom from slavery if we just keep acting like slaves? Well, in the previous 5 verses, Paul has continued to tackle the issue of false teachers trying to create spiritual slaves out of free people. There were Judaizers or legalists who slipped in to find a way to create spiritual or religious slaves. They were trying to distort the Gospel. And Paul said in Chapter One, that a false gospel is actually no gospel at all.

In the first 5 verses of Chapter 2, Paul is documenting his trip back to Jerusalem to meet with the church leaders before the Jerusalem Council, to ensure the church leaders hadn't fallen for this perversion of the Gospel. And that's where we pick it up in verse 6 (ESV):

⁶ And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me.

So Paul mentions “those who seemed to be influential”. By this, he's referring to Peter, James, and John. But then he goes on to say, *what they are makes no difference to me – God shows no partiality*. Now, that's true, but regardless, these men were of high respect, not because of who they were, or what they did, but rather how God viewed them. These men were appointed by Christ, just like Paul was appointed by Christ. And I love what Paul says there, because he recognizes that God does not show partiality. I think this is so important, because God does not care what we look like. God does not save us, based on our good looks, or our lack of looks. God doesn't care about how much money we have in the bank. He doesn't care about the car we drive or the house we have. He doesn't care how many degrees you have on your wall. He doesn't care how many jobs you've had. What God cares about most is the condition of the heart.

But that's not how we operate, is it? We build ourselves up, based on what we have done or what we can do. We build others up, based on what they've done, or what they promised to do. The problem is – that is shortsighted, and not how God does it. God does not look at the outside; He looks at the inside. He is concerned about the heart. God did not save you and He did not save me, based on what we could do, or what we have done. Ephesians 2:8 says, “**For by grace you have been saved.**” That's it. It was a gift. That same grace was experienced by these influential men of the early church. It was the same grace that was bestowed upon Paul. Their authority in the church was the same as Paul's, and it was given by grace.

Paul says, that after 17 years, he is back in Jerusalem with these men, not going for approval like acceptance, but rather recognition. Again, he wanted to make sure that he was not running in vain, and the message he had been preaching - that he had received from Christ Himself - was the same message that these pillars of the early church were still preaching: That Jesus Christ – God - is God in the flesh. He died, was buried and He rose again – “Is that right?” “Yes, that's the message we're preaching,” they said. He said, “Good, I just want to make sure that it's by grace you have been saved, not of ourselves, so that no one may boast. Is that what you're preaching?” “Yes, that's what we're preaching,” they said. And then Paul said nothing else. And according to verse six, they added nothing to him.

So after 17 years of running, of sharing the Gospel, Paul is in Jerusalem confirming that the Apostles are still preaching the *same* message. That's the same message that they received from Jesus Christ Himself. And then Paul continues in verse seven:

⁷ On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised ⁸ (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), (Gal. 2:7-8, ESV)

Again, this helps us understand that Paul was not going to Jerusalem to be accepted by the Jerusalem Apostles. Instead, he was going to be recognized as one who had been divinely commissioned to preach the Gospel. Paul says they did recognize this. And because they

recognize this, there was this acceptance, or unique partnership in the Gospel. But like any great team, you cannot have everyone exactly the same. That goes for their personality types, but also their gifts and their tasks. It's true - it says Peter was entrusted with the Gospel to the circumcised, in other words, the Jews. The Jews followed the ceremonial ritual of circumcision. That was Peter's calling - to share the Gospel with them. Now Paul was tasked with the *same* goal of preaching the Gospel, but he was commissioned to the Gentiles - the uncircumcised.

So much of Galatians is about making sure that the Gospel is intact and true. The Apostles in Jerusalem recognized Paul was preaching the true Gospel. The Judaizers were saying, "No that's not true at all, because he forgot to add works to it. That's the true gospel. You can't be saved purely by grace - you have to be following the law." But as we know from Acts 15, the Jerusalem Council endorsed Paul's message of grace apart from the law. And Paul was then instructed to go and tell the churches in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia that the message was true, and it should be embraced by all Christians. So this message that Salvation is through grace alone has been ratified, and Paul says, God worked through Peter and himself. The word "worked" here is where we get the English word "energized" or "empowered". Not only was this message and direction commissioned by God, it was *empowered* by God.

Paul finishes out this thought in the next 2 verses:

⁹ and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. ¹⁰ Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

So the pillars of the church, Peter, James, and John, were not first popes. They were not the heads of the church in the sense some people think, but they were the ones who supported and built the church. They embraced the true Gospel. He says, these men recognized the true Gospel that I've been preaching, that I received from Jesus Christ, just like them. And what did they do? They added *nothing* to it, and they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship. I don't think this is that hard to understand, but in the near East, to grab hands, or to grab the forearm of someone, was a sign - not just of friendship and acceptance - it was also a sign of fellowship and partnership. This was in essence saying, "We are on the same page; we are on the same team; we are brothers and partners until the very end."

And then there's an exchange at the end, where they asked Paul and Barnabas to remember the poor. This was not so much theological, but rather practical. We know on one hand, that in Second Thessalonians 3, Paul said that if anyone will not work, neither let him eat. And yet on the other hand, we know in passages like this, that we as Christians are to meet the needs of fellow believers in Christ, when they cannot do it on their own - whether it's orphans or widows, single moms or dads, or those with special needs. Paul was eager to do it, and so should we be eager to help those in need in the body of Christ.

Friend, I don't know what background you come from. I don't know what you've experienced in life. But if you are God's child, your past is erased, and you are welcomed into a fellowship and a partnership. **You truly are accepted by the King, not because of what you've done, but**

because of what Christ has done for you. You may have been rejected by a parent, a sibling, an old friend, or someone else, but **God says, “I love you. You are accepted. You are my masterpiece.”**

If you've never experienced belief in Jesus, God offers you Salvation and an opportunity to become part of a family unlike any else. You can experience unconditional acceptance. How? Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ - that He was God in the flesh. Believe that He died, was buried, and rose again. Turn from your sin, and turn to Jesus Christ as your only hope. Paul was adamant that Salvation comes freely by grace. There's nothing you can do to earn it, or buy it, or win it. Believe this, and let the power of Christ save your soul, and change your life.

For the rest of us, for those of us who have already turned to Christ, we know that the power of Salvation is the Gospel. Romans 1 tells us that, and because of that power, we should not be ashamed. We know according to First Corinthians 3, that God does the saving. We have a divine privilege to go and make disciples. So, knowing that you are empowered because of the message of the Gospel, my question to you is, where are you going to go? Who are you commissioned to? Peter had the Jews. Paul had the Gentiles - the rest of the unbelieving world. Who is God asking you to reach out to today? Who is it in your sphere of influence that you need to share the Gospel with? Is it someone who has a false gospel, which as we know, that's no gospel at all, and they are still in their sins? Is it someone truly far from God - maybe an atheist or an agnostic? Maybe it's the Buddhist that you work with. Maybe it's the Muslim in your school. **You have the power, because of what Christ has done, and because of the message He gave you. You do not need to be afraid or ashamed. Who will you reach?**

N: Well, I'm going to ask the same question of Arnie Cole and Cara Whitney. Who has God called each of you to reach?

A: I think the overall theme that I look at, for me, is kind of like Cara: I mean, whoever comes in my life. Char and I have been very proactive in not living in the Christian bubble. That's one way, is with our equestrian ministry. There's probably, most of the people, aren't Christ followers there. And I'm always looking at what God has for me today. And that includes people that He's going to bring into my life.

C: Yeah, I guess that's my thing too. I don't seek it - a mission or whatever. I just want God to use me. And you know, it's like the writing the books and all that. I don't consider myself an author. I'm an evangelist. And when God closes up shop there, that's cool. I'm not reaching any sort of goal. I don't have any ministry career. I'm doing this at Back to the Bible. And then when God says, I've got something else, He'll put me in another place. So I don't really think too much about it. I don't - there's no carrot or prize at the end - is it's just something that I'm just glad God's using me. I don't want to be a lump. Right?

N: Right. Well, I think you may have answered this question, but as we were talking, it kind of dawned on me that there may be some people listening today. And they go, “I don't think I'm an evangelist. I don't really have a burden for anybody. And I'm really just - it's not that big of a

priority. I'm not sure who I'm called to reach." How would you guys advise them? Arnie, how would you advise them?

A: You know, I think it's good to start the day with prayer - you know, open your eyes to the opportunities that you have for today. And that's really all you can do. The other thing though, that is probably even more important, is your testimony. And when I say testimony, what I mean is - don't have a testimony going the other direction - like being such a jerk, or so crummy to other people, that people think, "Man, if that's what a Christ follower is, I don't want to have anything to do with it." So I think you need to be very intentional to who God brings in your path each day, but also your testimony as well.

N: I think that's really sound advice. And I think God does provide opportunities every day. And so we do need to be on point. I was actually going to pick up a bike I needed repaired. And what was interesting is, I knocked on the door, and they were locked, and it was closed. And I'm like, "Well, this is not the time for them to be closed." But there was a note that said, you know, "We're closed for COVID - someone was exposed." And I was like, "Oh my goodness, I just needed this bike repaired." And someone came out, and they, you know, they asked me, "What can I do for you?" And I had to kind of like regroup myself, because I was visibly frustrated. And what's kind of crazy is, this person, you know, she goes, "Hey, you sound familiar. Like where do you go to church?" And I was like - we kind of talked about that. And she goes, "Whoa, are you from Back to the Bible?" And I go, "Well, yeah, I am." She goes, "I listen to your program every day." And it was just in that moment - though she was already saved - it reminded me exactly what you're saying: We've got to watch how we act and how we live. We have a testimony. And if that person was a nonbeliever, and I came off as a jerk - and just by chance, she figured out who I was - that would have severely damaged the cause of Christ. So we need to be constantly looking at how we are speaking, and how we are living, because that does impact our outreach. Cara, God calls each of His children a masterpiece. Well, we talked about that, and I love that picture of masterpiece. [I do too. I love it so much.] You know it, we talk about it. We love it. But how does knowing that you're a masterpiece influence your outreach to others?

C: Well, all of us waste too much time worrying about what other people think about us. So here's the question. All right. Who does God say I am? Ask yourself that - anyone listening, ask yourselves that - at any time, who does God say I am? Because what's so cool is, in Scripture, God is not timid about expressing His love for us. He repeats it multiple times. It's true. He says that each one is so valuable - to die for. That's how great and highly He thinks of us. So we're going to encounter people every day - and I used to be one of them, okay - that believe that they're a mistake. They're an inconvenience to someone - they're a cluster of cells. But we know as believers, that they are planned, that their life has a purpose - that they're a masterpiece made in the image of a God who loves them, who loved them first. And we should tell them who God says they are.

N: Once people realize, regardless of your background, your decisions, your past - we are all made in the image of God. Every one of us, no matter what we've done, where we've been, who we've been with - we are worthy of respect. And we do have a purpose, and God by his grace,

offers us - spiritual corpses - life, and life to the fullest. And when He does that, He redeems our past and He calls us a masterpiece. And that is a message that we need to share.