

“God’s Plan for Salvation”

Today our lesson comes from the epistle of Galatians. Galatians is a relatively short book in the biblical canon but it may be the most important. Why is that? When Paul wrote this letter to the churches at Galatia, both Paul and his gospel were under attack. As commentator William Barclay writes, if that attack had succeeded Christianity might have become just another Jewish sect. It might have become a thing for Jews and for Jews alone; a thing which was dependent upon circumcision and on keeping the law, instead of being a thing of grace. As Barclay puts it, it is a strange thing to think that, if Paul’s opponents had had their way, the gospel might have been kept for Jews, and we might never have had the choice to know the love of Christ.

The letter to the Galatians is not meant to be an anti-Jewish text. Today’s sermon on Galatians 3 is not meant to be anti-Jewish. The point to take from today is that if the theology of the Jewish Christians in Galatia had been accepted, then the rules and regulations of the Jewish law would have controlled early Christianity. This theology would have created two problems. First, by requiring adherence to Jewish law as part of the Christian faith, it practically would have done away with God’s grace. Second, by being so limiting it would have made the

acceptance of the Christian faith very unattractive to so called pagans or Gentiles, those who were not Jewish.

We need to establish the historical context for this epistle. Galatia was an area which is in modern day central Turkey. It was near the current capital of Turkey, Ankara. The Galatian people were of a Celtic background, having come to this part of Turkey around the 3rd century BCE. They were not Jewish. They would have been referred to as pagans or Gentiles.

Paul had made several trips to the people of Galatia. He had preached to them and helped them establish churches. His message to them was clear. Through Jesus Christ's death on the cross, God had established a way for all to be reconciled with God. One just needed to believe in Jesus Christ as one's savior and accept God's gift of salvation. Salvation was not obtained by following a set of rules and regulations.

Paul had received evidence that there was a group of Jewish-Christians who were teaching a new theology to the churches in Galatia. If a Gentile wished to become a Christian, he had to become a Jew first. What did this mean? It meant that he must be circumcised and that he must take on the whole burden of the law upon him. To Paul, this was the very opposite of all that Christianity meant. It

meant that a man's salvation was dependent on the man's ability to keep the law.

This was not the Gospel of Jesus preached by Paul.

In Galatians Paul is trying to explain and demonstrate the superiority of grace and faith over the way of the law. Paul knows, though, that he cannot just summarily dismiss the law as irrelevant. The Jewish people had followed the law for some 1500 years since being given the law by Moses. Prior to his conversion to Christianity, Paul himself had enforced the law. So, to be credible, Paul has to explain why the law existed and why it is not the way to salvation.

The law (the scripture) was added to place a constraint on sin. Before a man can be branded a sinner he must know the law. The function of the law is to define sin, but can do nothing to cure sin. It is to put someone on notice that they are not living as God would have them live. It acts similar to civil statutory law. For example, to be charged with a driving offense (speeding), a written law must exist which puts someone on notice that they will be breaking the law if they drive at a certain speed above the posted speed. If they break the law, they can incur penalties. But if they obey the law, it does not mean they are a good driver. It just means they have knowledge of the law.

Paul insists that the law had no function of salvation and was not intended for that function. The purpose of the law was to keep Israel in protective custody

until the coming of Christ into the world. As we read in Galatians 3:22, the law (Scripture) declares all human beings, Jew and Gentile alike to be “under the power of sin.” Through the law comes the knowledge of sin. The law discloses the truth about the human condition. We are alienated from God and stand under God’s righteous judgment. God has used the law to illustrate Israel’s condition of bondage to the power of sin. The law was a necessary step in God’s design to rectify the world through Jesus Christ. God acted through Christ’s faithful death to liberate us from the power of sin and the present evil age. This liberation applies to both Israel and Gentiles.

We must understand that the law forecloses all attempts at saving ourselves. Not matter how hard we try, we will fall short of obeying all the law. As William Barclay writes, man is driven to grace because he finds how helpless he is to satisfy the law.

In the Greek, Paul writes that the law was our “paidagogos” until Christ came. The English cognate of this word is “pedagogue.” In the time of Paul this person was a slave in the Greco-Roman world who supervised and guarded children. This was not a schoolmaster. He was in charge of the child’s moral welfare. It was his or her duty to make sure the child ran into no temptation or danger. He had one particular duty---it was his duty to take the child to school each

day and deliver him to the teacher. Paul says this was the purpose of the law. It was the function of the law to bring a man to Christ by showing him that by himself he was utterly unable to keep the law.

When the children grew up, the services of the “pedagogue” were no longer required. The law was like this for Israel. The law had a necessary role in confining, guarding, and disciplining God’s people in the time between Moses and Christ. But once Christ has come and died on the cross, we no longer have to come under the supervision of the Law. The law has served its purpose and its commission is at an end. The law should not be understood as a means to salvation and life. Once a person came to Christ, he no longer needed the law, for now he was dependent not on the law but on grace.

What is the practical application of Galatians today? Paul’s letter is a fountainhead of all subsequent theological reflection about justification by faith, the cross, the power of the Spirit, and the meaning of Christian freedom. When asked how one receives salvation, probably all of you would respond it is only by faith and not by works. In practice, however, many Christian communities are tempted to fall into rules and regulations and legalisms and morality that attempt to define us---and thus confine us. We have seen this with Roman imperial ideology, pre-Reformation Catholic hierarchy, indulgences, Victorian codes of propriety and

modern “political correctness.” Do you realize that many church buildings, including this one, once had separate entrances for men and women? Such division may seem odd today but at one time the members of Latimer believed it necessary for Christian formation.

The language used by Paul in Galatians 3:28 emphasizes there is no distinction in the Christian community basic on ethnic origin, economic status, or gender. Paul’s opponents in Galatia wanted to divide people based on ethnic heritage, but Paul would have nothing of this distinction. He knew he had to make sure the new Christians in Galatia knew their faith was based on a promise from God, that through our faith in Christ we had all been made sons and daughters of God. From God’s free grace, that all who believe in Jesus’ saving grace will share in the promise given to Abraham of eternal blessings. Let us never construct rules or regulations or legalisms which keep anyone from enjoying this gift from God. Salvation is open to all.