

March 24, 2019

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Words About Galatia

Galatia, located in the north-central region of modern-day Turkey, included people from different ethnic groups, but was largely Celts and Gauls who invaded and overtook this portion of Asia Minor in the third century BCE. These Gauls were distinguished from European Gauls by the term “Gallo-Graecians” from which the name “Galatians” was derived. With the coming of the Romans, the territory known as Galatia was extended to include a much larger area. By the first century, the Roman province stretched from the Black Sea in the north to the Mediterranean Sea in the south.

Unlike the *cities* of Corinth and Ephesus that we’ve learned about from Bob and Becky during the last couple of weeks, Galatia was a *region* which included many cities and various churches (although they would not have been called churches then). Biblical scholars are not exactly sure who Paul was addressing when he dictated the Epistle to the Galatians. If Luke’s account is historical, then Paul preached in southern cities of Galatia during his first journey, and later passed through the north-central territory on his later journeys. Determining who the recipients were will help scholars pinpoint when the letter was written.

Regardless of who he was writing to, we know that Galatia became an early stronghold for the Jesus movement. Paul’s preaching and his commitment to

converting Gentiles into believers paved the way for what later became known as Christianity.

Galatians 3:1-5, 10-11

³ You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! ²The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? ³Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? ⁴Did you experience so much for nothing? — if it really was for nothing. ⁵Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?

¹⁰Anyone who tries to please God by obeying the Law is under a curse. The Scriptures say, “Everyone who doesn’t obey everything in the Law is under a curse.” ¹¹No one can please God by obeying the Law. The Scriptures also say, “The people God accepts because of their faith will live.”

Homily

Jews of the first century differed from people following other religious traditions of the time because they were monotheistic, and they believed they had been specially chosen by the one God of the universe to be in covenant with him. This required them to serve him and to obey the laws of Moses - laws which governed every aspect of their daily lives. These included morality laws (murder, theft, adultery), social laws (property, inheritance, marriage), food laws (what meat, fowl and fish could be eaten as well as rules for preparation and storage), purity laws (rules around sex, menstruation, leprosy would have fallen in this category too), laws on sacrifices and offerings (of which many were required) - and this is not a complete list! There are 613 laws included in the Torah.

Mosaic law was the cornerstone of first century Judaism, even for the disciples. These laws provided for the spiritual and physical health of the Jewish people and a way of worship for their communities. But the predominate purpose was to provide the Jewish people justification (or right standing) before God. The message that Paul taught to the Galatians and elsewhere was not in agreement with this. He taught, and he argued, that Jewish law had no role in anyone's "right standing" before God. This was radical and progressive for his time!

When Paul wrote this letter, other Jewish missionaries of "the Jesus way" had come into Galatia to teach at the newfound churches, but their lessons taught that justification was dependent on adherence to certain Mosaic laws. They also taught that Gentile converts must go through the rites and rituals of Judaism as a prerequisite to becoming members of the religious community. Paul learned that

the Galatians had been influenced by these teachers, and he was outraged! These teachers completely perverted the idea of the message Paul was spreading and his converts believed it.

Until recently, I must admit, there was not a lot that I liked about Paul. Christianity has justified awful behaviors with words from Paul's letters (or perhaps words written by others in Paul's name): Paul has been cited to justify slavery, to support oppressive political leaders, to condemn same sex relationships, to keep wives submissive to their husbands, to keep women out of pulpits, and I could go on. The tone in today's passage does not portray him as likeable guy! He's angry, self-righteous and belittling. Later in the letter, Paul tells the Galatians not to gratify the desires of the flesh, which he lists, and they include enmity, anger and dissension. Instead he tells them to live by the fruits Spirit, which include love, peace and kindness. I would argue that Paul was not practicing what he was preaching – do as I say, not as I do! Paul's passion and his humanity are on full display in this passage. Who among us has not experienced anger, felt self-righteous and behaved in ways that have belittled others?

We recently read a book in our Adult Sunday School class written by John Shelby Spong, "Re-Claiming the Bible for a Non-Religious World." Spong is helping me view Paul in a better light. Regarding the letter to the Galatians, Spong says, *"Keeping the cultic rules of Judaism lost its urgency in Paul's proclamation of the infinite love of God, which he believed had been revealed in the life of Jesus."* This one sentence sums up the lesson for today. I too believe in the infinite love of

God, and I believe it has been revealed, among other places, in the life of Jesus. Prior to his conversion on the Road to Damascus, Paul had been a Pharisee – strict in his observance of Jewish law and tradition. Because of his transformation, faith for Paul became more than a system of laws and traditions; it became a way of life rooted in the infinite love of God. The needle on Paul’s moral compass completely changed direction! We need to consider on which of our own lives’ journeys our compasses might be pointing in the wrong directions.

Paul was teaching more than 400 years past the time the Jewish laws were first recorded. Think of how the world changed over that period of time. In our homeland, 400 years ago the colonists were settling; native Americans were being pushed out of their lands; colonization led to the development and legalization of the slave trade. Thank God Paul was changing the cultural laws of his time and thank God we don’t abide by the same cultural laws as we did 400 years ago. Society shifts; culture changes; laws adapt, and I think morality is relative to these changes and to our personal experiences, as illustrated through Paul’s story. I recently started watching a historical-fiction series on Netflix about the Manson family. I think it’s likely that we would agree that it’s wrong for a group of people to premeditate the taking of life from someone? That’s what the Manson family did. It’s also what SEAL Team 6 did when they killed Osama Bin Laden. I am not trying to say that these are commensurate because I don’t think they are. I suspect Bin Laden’s death saved countless other lives. I’m just illustrating that morality is relative.

Yesterday we had a representative from Justice Ministries visit with some Sardis folks to teach us about human trafficking in Charlotte. We mostly talked about sex trafficking, of which Charlotte is the #1 hub in North Carolina, and NC is ranked #4 in states with the greatest trafficking problems. Few women in the sex industry are in it by choice. They are mostly victims of human trafficking forced into and then trapped into dangerous situations where they've endured horrendous forms of abuse. Our speaker mentioned that virtually all the victims her organization supports have a legal record. In our culture, prostitutes are villainized, but their johns aren't. The moral compass is pointed in the wrong direction, and I believe we can learn from Paul that our compasses need to be calibrated toward the infinite love of God. May it be so, and may it be soon.