

## Reckoned as Righteous

Galatians 3:1-14

October 3, 2021

Read Galatians 3:1-14

This is the Word of the LORD.

Prayer of Invocation

“You foolish Galatians!” That’s how Paul addressed the Galatians at the beginning of our verses today. A better sense of the tone would be, “You IDIOTS! How could you possibly fall for this?”

So, what was going on here? Paul was going all *Bull Durham* on the Galatians. *Bull Durham* was a 1988 movie starring Kevin Costner as Crash Davis, an aging catcher who was demoted to Single A Minor Leagues in order to help mature a rising young star. The Durham Bulls were in the midst of a losing streak highlighted by poor play and a lack of effort. The manager approached Crash with his frustration with the team. “I don’t know what to do with these guys,” he lamented, “I beg. I plead. I try to be a nice guy; I’m a nice guy.” Crash responded, “Scare ‘em.” “Huh?” “They’re kids. Scare ‘em. That’s what I’d do.” So the manager took an armload of bats and threw them into the shower, shocking the guys who were in there, and shouted, “Everyone into the shower. Anyone not in the shower in 10 seconds is fined a hundred dollars.” They all rushed in, at which point he said, “You guys, you lollygag the ball around the infield. You lollygag your way down to first. You lollygag in and out of the dugout. You know what that makes you? Lollygaggers.” And he goes on. “This is a simple game. You throw the ball. You hit the ball. You catch the ball. You got it?!”

The point is this: he was scaring them to knock them out of complacency. He was scaring them to wake them up from the delusion under which they had fallen, to remind them what was at stake. In the movie, it was about their progression as ballplayers, with the hopes of getting to the major leagues. As silly as it was, the manager took them back to the very basics so that they would remember what it was they were supposed to be doing: you throw the ball, you hit the ball, you catch the ball. It is simple.

For Coach Paul, it was all about reminding the Galatians what had been revealed to them, what they had believed, and why they were hurting themselves by yielding up to some smooth-talking teachers selling them something else.

Specifically, as Paul stated in the very introduction to the letter – in the salutation itself – he preached a revolutionary gospel: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” Jesus set us free – all of us. Jesus gave himself to set us free from our sins.

The Galatians would not have argued with Paul's repetition of the gospel. "Yes, that's what he taught us." The problem was that they did not take it fully to heart; they did not appreciate how completely and totally Christ changed everything. As a result, they were not discerning. They were consumers of theology – consumers of ideas or consumers of words – rather than embracers of Christ. They had become passive listeners. They liked what they heard from Paul. That was good for a while. But then someone else came – the people from Jerusalem – and they liked that, too. Well, when the people from Jerusalem told them a practical list of things they could do to gain better standing with God, the Galatians received it without critical reflection. "Become like Jews to be better Christians," they heard. "What could be so wrong with that?" Surely you won't die; rather, you will be *more* like the people God has chosen.

Sound familiar? It was the temptation of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. "Surely you won't die; for God knows when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." How did that turn out for Adam and Eve?

Friends, passive engagement with theology is rife with the probability that you are going to be led into error. For example, you have heard me say that you should trust me only insofar as what I am proclaiming is consistent with the gospel. That is absolutely true. Being an active listener means you are doing two things: first, you are praying that God guard my heart, my mind, and my tongue in Christ Jesus; and second, you are doing your own work of discernment. It means you are responsible for digging into Scripture for yourself. (Not "by" yourself; but "for" yourself – there is a difference.)

The standard for evaluating my preaching is not whether I am entertaining or tell endearing stories. The standard is whether I am proclaiming the gospel. There are two audiences whenever I preach, including this morning: non-believers and believers. For non-believers, it is my prayer that God use this time to convict your heart of the truth of the gospel and your need for the saving grace of Jesus Christ. For believers, it is my prayer that God use this time to equip you with confidence and boldness to share the gospel with others when you go forth from here.

Take note: the issue is not whether you are "being fed," because that has more to do with your heart than it does with the sermon. It is an old axiom that the role of the sermon is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.

Look: no one should always agree with me. I don't. I have gone back and wrestled with sermons I have preached. So, if you find you disagree with me, do the work to determine if your disagreement is with me or is with the gospel. If it is with me, come and tell me because I do not want to be in error. I need you to love me enough to correct me. If your disagreement is with Scripture; well, then you have a more difficult decision to make: are you going to go with what you feel is right or are you going to abide by what you have discovered in Scripture?

The point is that you need to be an active listener. You need to be discerning. The sermon is more than an information-push. It is more than a lecture. Faith is more than cramming for a

test to make sure you know the correct answers. Satan is a better Bible scholar than any of us here; and just because Satan knows the right answers does not mean his heart is right with God. Worship is more than listening to me to determine if you can catch me in an error or judging the quality of a sermon. The point of the sermon is to equip you *so that you* can lay your life before Jesus in praise opening the gospel to Carson City and beyond.

Let me go one step farther: it is essential that we not only hold me accountable, but we need to hold one each other accountable as a community of faith. We are called and gathered together by Christ. Just as I have invited and exhorted you to hold me accountable for the gospel I proclaim, so also we need to be building up one another in Christ. We need to build up one another; otherwise, we will fall apart.

How were the Galatians being foolish? They were not discerning. They were being seduced to think that the salvation they received in Jesus as Lord and Savior could be improved; that they could *better* earn God's love if they could be more like Jesus – because, well, you know – Jesus was a Jew.

And there it was. If you were just passively riding along, it would make perfect sense. But that is where we need one another: to call each other to account by remembering that Jesus had established a *new* Israel. Because Jesus is Lord of all – “all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me” – there was no justification for trying to take on the burden of being the old Israel. Doing so only created divisions within the new Israel. Just as Peter's withdrawing from the Gentiles in Antioch led others into the same error and created a division; the Galatians taking on circumcision and other things to be *better Jewish* Christians would only lead to competition and division.

It is so subtle, but so foundational. The temptation to seek to better ourselves in comparison with other believers is still around. We are – if honest – guilty of it, too. We compare ourselves to others to feel better about ourselves. We voice humility, simultaneously forgiving our own sins while holding grudges against others whom we perceive have sinned against us. “Oh, I know I am not Billy Graham or Mother Theresa; but how can that person be a Christian and do that?” We feel better in our standing with God if we can look down on others who are struggling or who are not as “Christian” as we are.

That is not the way in the new Israel. The new Israel exists because of what God has done in Jesus Christ *for* us; for *all* of us.

They had seen the power of Christ for themselves. Jews and Gentiles were sitting down and sharing fellowship together as equals – and in that day and age, such a thing was simply not done. When Paul wrote, “It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!” he was reminding them that the proclamation of Jesus' atoning death and victorious resurrection were the *only* elements of the gospel of salvation for Jew *and* Gentile. He then spelled out why:

- **Paul:** Did you receive the Holy Spirit by works of the law – or – believing the gospel?  
**Response:** Well, Paul, by believing the gospel would be the correct answer.
- **Paul:** Then, if you have started with the Spirit, why would you go back to the flesh – that is, trying to earn favor with God through the law, either righteousness or merit?  
**Response:** Well, I suppose there really is not a good answer to that.
- **Paul:** Did you experience so much for nothing?  
**Response:** Paul, that's unkind.
- **Paul:** Well 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?  
**Response:** By belief, you are right.

Paul then pointed out that God had designed this from the very beginning of his plan for redemption. In his promise to Abraham – when he called Abraham to leave his country and kindred and his father's house to go to a land that the LORD *would* show him – God said: "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and *in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*" (Genesis 12:3)

That blessing of Abraham for all families was fully realized in Christ. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" – did you know that? Christ took on the curse that you and I have incurred because of our sin – "in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." Jesus became our curse so that we could stand by faith in his righteousness. All who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed. Believing in God – not by works, not by any merit of our own or any act we can perform – righteousness is reckoned to us.

### **Come back to Jesus.**

Now we can chuckle a little bit about Coach Paul's chewing out the Galatians because we are at a safe distance of almost two thousand years. However, if Paul were here today, do you really think he would go any easier on us?

On this World Communion Sunday, consider how the church is acting today. Look at the kind of divisions Christians create against one another. Look at the comments section of any social media – will they know we are Christians by our love?

Here's my point: Paul would have been aghast how we are pitting ourselves against one another on things that have no salvation significance.

Please hear me clearly: Paul would *not* argue that political or social issues were not important; he *would* scream about how we have made them essential. Friends, how we deal with political and social issues must be founded upon how we understand our identity in Christ. Arguing

policy and politics must come from a clear presentation of the *grace* of the kingdom of heaven we have received. We boast only in what Christ has done; we have no room to boast about what we have done on Christ's account. We are the new Israel; we are the priesthood of all believers, God's holy nation – we are to be Jesus' witnesses. We are to present the gospel to a world desperate in need, and we are to lift up before God the cares and concerns of the community and world to which we have been called and to which we have been sent.

We are called to speak into the world's social issues for the purpose of lifting up the hope of the kingdom of God. We ought not expect that the world will listen eagerly or seek to conform to God's call – Jesus told his disciples that the world would reject us just as it rejected him. Nonetheless, we speak about the hope of the kingdom of heaven as the starting point for addressing justice, righteousness, and holiness.

Not only should we not expect the world to simply conform to our assessment of what God wants, we cannot expect everyone inside the church to agree. Good heavens, everything after the gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – involves problems, conflicts, and struggles *within* the church that was trying to be faithful to Jesus in a broken and confusing world.

Just as circumcision and observance of the law of Moses were not essential; there are no litmus tests or checklists of positions on social issues that define *those whom God has chosen, adopted, and claimed as his own*. There is no litmus test or checklist of positions on social issues that *define those who have responded to Jesus' call to discipleship*. The local congregation is a microcosm of the larger body of Christ: we do not get to choose one another. Instead, we recognize that Jesus has chosen us – you and me and all of us together – and we are called to love one another. We are to do whatever it takes to struggle *with* one another, recognizing that the goal is to glorify Christ in all we do.

Paul would write it this way in Colossians:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

*Within the church we are called* to love one another by engaging with one another, sharing with one another, building up one another – even when we disagree. We are to work together to figure out ways to bridge those things that would divide, recalling that it is only in Jesus that we have hope. The righteousness we have comes by faith in what Jesus has done; it is a faith we

have received by grace. The righteousness others have comes by faith in what Jesus has done. We are humbled by the reality that it is the same Jesus who saved us *and* them. It is that same Jesus who gathered his disciples around this table to celebrate a meal he longed to share with them – and with us today.

This table is a tangible representation of that unity in Christ. We gather around this table today – here and all around the world – recognizing that it is only because of Christ and in Christ that we are invited to be here. We are here together. We are here as brothers and sisters in Christ.

As we prepare to move into this part of the service take a few moments to be actively discerning: remembering the brokenness in your own life; the brokenness in our life together; and then, remembering the grace and victory Jesus has won for us – with the assured promise of our salvation because, by faith, his righteousness has been reckoned to us.

Amen.

Invitation to Table (Lord's Supper)

Questions:

1. Have you ever needed a wake-up call to remember the foundation of your faith? Where and how has God brought you to your knees remembering Jesus set us free – all of us.
2. Because Jesus has set us free – all who receive him as Lord and Savior – how do you deal with the difficulty of engaging those with whom you disagree?
3. How can you (and are you) digging into Scripture for yourself? What is the difference between digging into Scripture *by* yourself and digging into Scripture *for* yourself?