

Oct 21- More than Rules

Galatians 3:10-14

These verses are among the most difficult to understand of Paul's writings. Scholars have been discussing, arguing and dissecting them for generations. At first glance, it seems to be saying that those who rely on the law are cursed by God. This denunciation of those who follow the Law has been used by the Christian church to condemn Judaism. Later it was used by Protestants to condemn the Catholic Church, which they again paint as a legalistic entity. This is a gross characterization of Judaism. They have the Law but they also have ample provisions for forgiveness. Even Paul at one time said of himself that he had been a Pharisee and as to righteousness under the Law, blameless. This certainly does not mean that Paul never sinned. It simply indicates that his transgressions were dealt with according to the Law's provisions and so he was in no way wracked with a guilty conscience. So what is being said in this confusing few verses and does it have anything to say to us? I am guessing that you know my answer because if I didn't think it applied I wouldn't be preaching on it!

As we have learned Paul was angry with a group from Jerusalem who were trying to force a certain point of view on the churches in Galatia. It had caused division. More than circumcision, they were implying that following the Law was necessary for Salvation. Many scholars believe that this idea is at the heart of what Paul is attacking in these verses. Paul says basically that he has preached "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." To now insert believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and follow these Laws and you will be saved is wrong. It is making salvation based on following the Law not on the life and message of Jesus. This is why he says you are cursed to rely on the Law. He uses some interesting twisting of Old Testament Scriptures to get there but that seems to be the thrust of his message. By faith all are blessed. He goes right back to Abraham who was seen as blessed and righteous by God even before the Laws were given or he was circumcised. Faith and belief is how you receive the promise of God. In these verses Paul turns things totally on their head. He now says to follow the Law is to be cursed. While in ages past, following the Law was a sign that they were blessed and the chosen people. To live following the Spirit now is the sign of blessedness. From this

idea comes Luther's "justification by faith." And John Wesley's "By Grace you have been saved."

This interpretation of these verses seems to make the most sense to me in the light of the fact that Paul had a career-long battle concerning obedience to the Law verses being led by the Spirit of God. Many early Christians believed that they had to be faithful Jews as well as Christians. That meant following the Jewish dietary, purity and circumcision laws. Paul early came to understand that God was moving out into the Gentile community in powerful and life-giving ways that were not dependent upon following the rules. Paul believed that Jesus came so that all, Jews and Gentiles, would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Even to this day, we like laws. Laws are easy. There is a right way and a wrong way to do things and to believe. We tend to embrace those Laws that support our views and use them to attack those who believe differently. Haven't we all heard, "The Bible says....." The statement implies that there is one and only one interpretation of an issue. They know what it is and the Bible backs them up. They are right and anyone who disagrees with them is wrong.

Living by the Spirit is messy, changing, and dynamic. It causes us to continue to pause and ask, "What is God saying at this moment, in this place to these people or to me?" This view does not challenge core beliefs, but does say that a lot of what we think is important might not really be that big of a deal in God's eyes. We have to see how the Spirit is moving in the lives of those who believe differently. Paul had spent a lot of time with Gentiles. He had come to see how the Spirit of God in Jesus had filled them, transformed them and enriched them. They were definitely striving to be faithful to the teachings of Jesus. This really led him to understand that Jewish Laws had nothing to do with faithfulness. It was a major change for a former Pharisee. That caused him to go back to his faith roots, to Abraham, to see how God had been at work in his life. He realized that God was still working in the same way to this day. To set up these rules as important now was wrong, divisive and belittled the faith of the Gentiles. But to accept this new way of understanding meant challenge and condemnation from others who did not see things the same way.

So here is my question for you today. Are you willing or able to live a Spirit guided faith? Before you say yes too quickly, think about all I have been saying. To say yes might cause you to have to uproot some tent stakes you have pounded firmly into the ground of your faith life and say that because of the experiences I have had, I see God has moved the tent. That is hard to do. To live a Spirit-guided faith is to embrace a bit of chaos and to see what God is doing instead of hiding behind labels. We like labels and we always put them on people to our best advantage.

Let me share a simple story of the messiness of Spirit living. I have often told this story so if you have heard it forgive me. In my first church in Bonners Ferry, Idaho, I was sitting at my desk on Monday morning when the President of the Women's group came into my office. She was angry. She waved a couple of dirty spoons at me and almost screeched, "Do you see this?" She had been down in the kitchen and noticed in the sink some dirty spoons. The youth group had met the night before and had ice cream. They had thrown the plastic bowls away but put the dirty spoons in the sink. She wanted a lock on the kitchen. She wanted the Ad Council to meet and ban the youth from using the kitchen. She said, "There are signs that say keep it clean!" They were not following the rules and so they should be banned. I took a deep breath and looked away because I could not let her see my smile. I thought, "How silly to create an uproar like this over eight spoons." I promised to talk to the leader of the youth group and get back with her but asked her to celebrate the fact that we had kids. She wasn't buying it. Later that week when I did talk to the leader I found out that she thought she was doing exactly what they had been told to do. She had been at a meeting where that same woman had said to all that we had a commercial kitchen and everything needed to be run through the dishwasher before being put away. The youth leader did not want to fire up the dishwasher for eight spoons, so had rinsed them and left them for the next time the dishwasher was used. She asked, "Did I do wrong?" I assured her that it was fine. When I called up the woman and shared the conversation she sputtered. She didn't know what to do. She had given what now was apparently two conflicting rules. Finally, one of the other women in the group said that she would take on as part of her service coming in on Mondays and making sure the kitchen was ready for the rest of the week. Rigid rules almost caused a rift with a program that was growing in ministry to youth.

But having the youth use the kitchen was messy. They don't always do things exactly as others would suggest.

So, Paul challenges us to celebrate how God's Spirit is at work. It breaks out in people different from us in many ways. They might not conform to our rules, or even our values, but we see a sweetness of the Spirit growing in their lives. Paul says this is what is key. It goes clear back to Abraham. Responding to God's call to faithfulness, according to Paul, trumps just about everything else. To do so is to be righteous. Do we then have to figure out how to be together in Christ? Of course. Do people on both sides of an issue have to compromise a bit? Yes. But God will help us. Just as that one woman taking on the role of cleaning the kitchen cleared up a literal and church mess God will work with all who are filled with God's spirit to come to a place of love and unity.

May we always be open to the Spirit and how God is doing a new thing. Let us not be so focused on rules that we forget to celebrate what God is doing anew even if that challenges some of our ideas. The people from Jerusalem had to set aside the idea that only the Jews were the chosen people of God. They had to begin to see Gentile followers of Jesus were equally beloved and chosen and loved people of God. It was a struggle but are we not glad Paul won this one? Of course! I hope a generation or two from now someone will look back on us and see where we have struggled, compromised, dealt with a mess to come to some new place that blesses them. This is what Paul says it means to be a follower of Christ.