

**Image is Everything**

June 19, 2016

Michael Slayter – Director of Stephen Ministries  
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

**Scripture**

Galatians 3:23-29  
Psalms 139:13-14

**SERMON**

I'm sure many of us remember the TV commercial made by Andre Agassi years ago when he said, "Image is everything." I think it was a camera commercial. You might recall Mr. Agassi took great pride in his appearance, especially in front of the media and showed no hesitation in admitting it to anyone and everyone.

Maybe if I had had his good looks, his youth, his money, his athleticism, I might have said the same thing.

So, let's talk about another man of strong self-esteem. Paul was a man of strong opinion and anyone of that nature will easily make enemies. He was remembered for his persecution of the church, which didn't help his popularity. In addition, people did not consider him an apostle in the usual manner, which Paul openly admitted to. That is, he did not know Jesus in person like the others had. When the apostles needed to pick a replacement for Judas, they looked for someone who had known Jesus during his earthly life and had witnessed the resurrection. Paul couldn't make this claim. But, he qualified himself by saying that his gospel came to him straight from God.

In the early decades of the first century, many Jews who accepted Christianity believed it was for Jews only. But here was Paul, preaching to Gentiles. The Jews would assert that God would judge Israel by one measure and the Gentiles by another. In other words, they believed God's love was for the Jews only. So, when it came to racism, the Jews practiced it well. Church was treated like an exclusive club. They felt a sense of privilege.

I guess that is human nature, because we see this attitude in certain congregations even today. I can honestly say that we do not have that problem here.

The Jews of those days really saw themselves as very different from all the others. If we can fast forward to our age where we are more highly technical, we know the variation in the DNA that accounts for the differences in people around the world amounts to only a small fraction of 1% of the whole human genome. Which means we are more alike than we are different. But, the Jews back then regarded themselves as special. In fact, the morning prayer of a Jewish man included thanks to God that he was not a slave, a Gentile, or a woman.

More about that later.

Much of Galatians deals with the Jewish emphasis on the law. So, if a Gentile wanted to become a Christian, he had to become a Jew first, with all the ritual associated around that change. Salvation came from being a Jew and being a Jew came from the law; that is, one earned it. Paul preached that it came from grace. Earlier in Paul's letter, he asks them "When your life in Christ began, did it start with keeping the law or with hearing and believing that Jesus is Lord?" He left that question hanging over them. You see, initially, the Galatians had readily accepted Paul's message almost as though they had witnessed the cross first-hand. Then the Jewish Christians stepped in and muddied the water with their adherence to rules.

Old habits are hard to break, especially habits that have been in place for many centuries. The laws were like a doctor who could make a diagnosis, but has no tools or wherewithal to treat a disease.

So, to continue their argument, some of the Jews suggested that the Gentiles should honor only parts of the law. Paul said no to that because it did not represent an understanding of Paul's thought process. Partial compliance was not the answer.

Just like back in the 60's when guys were burning their drafts cards, one man suggested they just boil them. Paul saw salvation as a gift and with

his track record and the way he had been converted, it's not hard to see how he thought this way. Many times he makes the statement that he is so very undeserving. He reminded the Galatians that the Holy Spirit at work does not depend on law-keeping.

But the Jews were stubborn and argued that the greatest thing in their national life was the law. It was the law given to Moses. And if you look at the Talmud, which I call the Jewish Book of Order, you will see how they took Mosaic law and embellished it with layer after layer of details. But, when asked who the founder of the nation was, they would answer, "Abraham!" But that was a trick question because Abraham lived 430 years before the law was given. On what did Abraham base his obedience to God? That was Paul's trump card. Abraham, founder of the nation, acted on faith in God's promise, God's covenant, not on law-keeping.

And Paul intended to get back to fundamentals and base his message on faith. Mosaic Law has been described as the law intended for *adolescent* children of God. They needed rules because they could not think for themselves. The first law given was in the garden. It was a matter of 'Don't think, just obey!' Paul is saying that Abraham acted on faith and Jesus came to us, showing what real faith was. So now, these Christian Jews should consider themselves as *adult* children of God and should behave and believe as adults.

Paul's argument was one big circle. We have heard that faith without works is dead. The Jews saw works as adherence to the law. They are both intimately related. What leads to what? The circle has to begin somewhere. As Christians, we believe faith leads to good works and good works becomes part of our faith, not the other way around. Faith in God is always the starting point. The law, by itself, is a sorry unsatisfying substitute for the God who offers himself, Father, son, and spirit, through the gift of grace.

So, if God's grace and our faith is the basis of our relationship to God, where does that leave the law? It is still there, in a manner of speaking. But it points us to something; something more important. There is an old far eastern proverb that says, "The finger that points to the moon is not the moon." It is merely the thing that directs one's attention. Here's another

example: Greek culture and in the Greek world, many households had a long time trusted servant whose job included getting the kids off to school. He was one of high moral value and completely dependable. His job was not to teach the children, but to deliver them to the teacher. For the Jews, the law could have been the same thing in that it should have pointed them to Christ. We do not know what sin is unless there is a rule that says what it is. Once we are aware of sin, then we can see ourselves in need of salvation.

Today is Father's Day and there is a parallel between that holiday and our lesson for today. We raise our children just as the father of the prodigal son raised him, to have rules and boundaries. But at some point, the child must be turned loose and allowed to fly on its own. How you have raised him/her, you hope, is the direction that the child will continue in; not simply following rules, but with an understanding that will lead to a full, righteous life, knowing that when he/she stumbles, God picks us back up. Paul said that the law came from God and was a guide that would lead people to Christ. Even as Jesus said, he came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. We can say that the law is still in place, but following Christ is beyond the law. The law is a tutor who brings us to Christ. When the law has served its purpose, then the training wheels come off.

Like the prodigal son, we will stray from the true course laid down by the law, but as the young man's father was forgiving, God's grace picks us back up and places us back on track.

So, if Jewish law is then superseded by faith in Christ, what has happened to the Jewish exclusive place in God's kingdom? It's gone and that is what got Paul in so much hot water. In fact, if the Jewish Christians had had their exclusive way, Christianity would today be just some little obscure sect of the Jewish religion and we would not be here today. Paul's message in the letter to the Galatians was centered on unity in Christ, not unity in the law.

Let's go back to our Jewish man in his early morning prayer. He was thankful he was not a slave, a Gentile, or a woman. I must say, I think those fellows were the real bullies of the playground. Talk about a sense of entitlement! That's worse than some major league pitchers I have watched!

I won't mention any names, but they wore bright socks and played at Fenway.

But Paul says there is no difference between Jew or Greek, free or slave, male or female. To me, it means there was something much, much higher to relate to; much higher than earthly divisions defined by laws and enforced by arrogant playground bullies. Clearly, Paul saw an inherent need in all of us for something special, and so let us tie together everything said up until now and think about this very special, inherent need. The need was and is salvation and it comes not from rules or divisions in human society, but from our very humanness; our creation in God's image, to be specific. Without our being created in His image, the whole bible is just a moot point.

Do you ever wonder just what God's image means? What did you learn in your younger years? When you want to know what God is like, you look at Jesus. And what do we have in common with him? It is the same thing we have in common with the lack of distinction between Jew and Greek, free and slave, male and female; it is our humanness.

Jesus was the true, true image of God. Why so? It was not because of his wisdom, his spirituality, or piety, morality or even because of his power. He was the true image because of the way he lived completely for God and for the good of fellow humans. I am sure you have heard it said that we are relational creatures. That's not just a definition of Homo sapiens, it defines how God made us. It was what Jesus showed us by living it. Notice how he took us beyond the laws?

To be human means to be focused outside of ourselves. Can the law force you to do that? No. When we focus inwardly, not just for our basic needs, but inwardly with no room for others, we lose a portion of our humanity and we look less and less like the image of God and are then more in need of laws and rules. That's going backwards. Our God seeks community with us and wills that we have community with others. This will not come from a basic instinctiveness, but is something freely chosen, intentional and personal. God's way is so uncomplicated. Loving God is not supposed to be that hard!

I do not mean to say that we should not care for ourselves. In fact Jesus said to love others as we love ourselves.

Humankind was created for relationships. One of my favorite female vocalists is Barbara Streisand. I don't know who wrote this song for her but do you remember she sang that people who need people are the luckiest people in the world? I can sit and listen to her for hours. Every time someone makes a friend, reaches out to someone else, hugs a child, meets for coffee, weeps for someone else's pain, that person is confirming his/her own creation in God's image. And picture this: there's no mosaic law that says we have to do these things.

To be human is to be offered a significant opportunity; the opportunity to carry the face of Christ to others; to speak and act as the image of God. So that when we walk into a room, people will not say to themselves, "There is someone with a rule book." They will say, "There walks one of God's children."

Once we understand and practice true humanity, we no longer need the law as our foundation. What a privilege to be forged in God's image, to have the chance to strive toward being truly human! Our Lord Jesus was the ultimate example of living with an outward focus and he waits for us – in a heavenly realm – still genuinely human – still loving us.

Amen.