

“All In The Family”

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Galatians 4:4-7 page 189 in pew bibles

4 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent His son, born of a woman, born under the law,

5 in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.

6 And because you are children, God has sent the spirit of his son into our hearts crying “Abba! Father!”

7 So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

May God give his blessing on the hearing and reading of his Holy Word.

Sermon

All in the Family

As I look at this scripture, I wonder what it meant by, “...the fullness of time,” and “...those under the law?” But, what interests me the most is: what does Paul mean by ‘adoption?’

What do you call it when someone outside a family is given status as a family member? The word is ‘Adoption.’ But, why would God need to adopt me? I thought I already belonged to Him.

As always, we need to set the scene from this passage to fully understand it. Paul has written this letter to the gentile Christians in Galatia, and the theme of the whole letter is the power of God’s grace. It points out that merely keeping the law is not sufficient for salvation.

And why should the Galatians be concerned about ‘the law?’ They weren’t even Jews!

The Jews had ‘the law’ from the time of Moses, but the Galatians did not. They were gentiles!

Paul was under attack for his apparent emphasis on grace and allegedly diminishing the significance of the law. Paul knew his message would put him in a dangerous position, but he stayed the course because he

knew the importance of it. But the Jews misunderstood him. He was not saying the law was no longer needed because it formed the fundamental definition of sin. But, ironically, the law also illustrated that no one could perfectly and completely adhere to it, thereby strongly implying the need for something else besides the law.

What was that something else? It would be something not only salvific but unifying.

Turn your imagination on for a second. If I have no inclination for appreciating art, then tickets to an art museum would not interest me. But, what if, like the Jews and their laws, I had no choice and was given not only tickets, but a museum booklet that contained security statements, the hours of operation, the street address, upcoming events, and the price of the tickets. Would I now have a full appreciation? Probably not.

I would need something else. So there I am in this boring place and I find myself suddenly standing next to an elderly man whom I don't know, but there's something of a longing in his face as we both look at the same painting. Other people seem to know who he is, so I ask and I find out he is the artist who created that painting. I also find out that he did the painting from inspiration of a place he loved dearly, many years ago before the ravages of war changed the landscape. That information is not in the book. I see the pain in his eyes, the long and deep sighs of far off memories and then I look back at the picture with more understanding. Meeting him was my 'something else that I needed.'

Paul said that 'something else' for us was salvation through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The law had become a boring robotic habit that had lost its intended flavor and had no spiritual impact. It was like that book I was given at the museum. Something was missing. And so, we see, as Paul puts it, "...the fullness of time had come."

Paul's Jewish Christian opponents, could not simply let old habits go and came up with the idea of Judaizing the gentiles. Make them become Jews first, they said, as a prerequisite to becoming a Christian. In essence, this made the effectiveness of God's grace dependent on Jewish law. This always amused me, because no religious ritual can

change who you are genetically. So, the whole Judaizing thing was just a ceremonial façade.

So, Paul is trying to explain, under no uncertain terms, to the gentiles of Galatia, the priority of grace over law, but doing so without divorcing himself from the law completely.

In earlier verses of this letter, he says that if anyone, even an angel from heaven, should try to replace the gospel of Christ with something else, let that person be utterly and completely condemned! That's strong language, but it was needed to get people's attention.

So, Paul decides to start at the very beginning to illustrate this indescribable gift from God. In chapter 3, he gently, but firmly, reminds the Galatians of what they had been taught and that God found had favor with the Jewish ancestor, Abraham, because of his faith, not because of adherence to any set of laws. Why? As you have probably heard before, there weren't any Mosaic laws for Abraham to follow. That would not come for another three hundred years! And so, based on God's word alone, not on laws, the Jews and gentiles alike may be heirs in Christ. There's that word, 'heirs' again.

So, now we arrive at the beginning of chapter 4, in which Paul uses the term 'children' regarding the heirs of God's promise. We all have heard of true stories of kings and queens who rose to the throne while still in their childhood years. Paul says that even though childhood heirs may own an entire estate, they are subject to guardians and trustees appointed to care for their best interest until such time set by their father for them to reach the status of having full rights. In fact, they have no more privilege than a slave, Paul says, even though they own great wealth.

Paul is saying that before the gospel of Christ became known, the people of Israel were spiritual children in God's eyes. And so, with the salvation of Christ now in clear view, the door to spiritual adulthood is open and waiting. The promise to Abraham was not made to the gentiles, but the door of Christ's salvation, that 'something else' is open to them with status equal to the Jews. That's where the real rub came in. The first Christian Jews believed the gentiles had not paid their dues.

But, Paul says they are welcome into the family of faith in Christ. And family is a key word in today's message.

Let's go back to the art museum. The elderly gentleman has turned his gaze from the picture and is now looking at me and he wants to tell me, and anyone else who cares to know, about the scene in the picture. He wants to tell me things that are not in the booklet that was handed out at the museum entrance. Others press in to hear. Our task is to listen and feel his words tug at our heart and for a few precious moments, we all share in hearing his story. It bonds us together as we listen.

Through Jesus, God has been the initiator in telling his story. And only God can be the initiator in this case. Another way of seeing God as the initiator is to consider the relationship between a king and a commoner on the street. If ever there is to be dialog between the two, the king must make the first move. It is so between God and us.

Still, even with God making the first move, the relationship is a two-way street.

We are all children of God inasmuch as all we have He gave us. But a true relationship requires mutual input. Our input is to trust that Jesus is God in the flesh, come to earth for us. It's that something else apart from the law.

And in accepting that 'something else' we are here today as adopted children in the family of Christ. With few exceptions, the vast majority of Christ's family today are gentile like us, adopted. But the scripture says, "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." Many believe that Paul is suggesting that all followers of Jesus are adopted children; that none of us, Jew or gentile, have sole claim to the Father. I imagine that really put the Jewish Christians right over the edge! Only Jesus has that claim and now we share in his kinship and inheritance.

And so what do we call the family of Christ? **CHURCH!** That is what makes this scripture today so personal. This is baptismal Sunday and don't think for one second that I have forgotten that. This is the day we traditionally pay attention to the baptism of our Lord. That was the start of the family. Our baptism and the commitment that goes with it binds us

to him and to each other. Our baptism is like looking at the picture with him in the museum.

Where else are there places left in our world where people of such wide diversity *choose* to spend time together every single week? Voluntarily, we come together. We sit next to each other in the pews. We touch and hug during our greetings. We discuss the Bible in Sunday school. We believe there is a cord of unity that holds us all together in the body of Christ.

We are family. And like so many adopted children, we often wonder how we got here. The rational of our beginnings can be traced back to the first Christmas. Our scripture says, "...when the fullness of time had come," and we can finish the sentence by saying, "God made Christmas happen."

And this milestone should come as no surprise, because the prophets told us it would happen. The timing was not certain, but there was no doubt in the prophets' minds that it would.

But, this is when we should stop to look at the whole timeline of how we got here. Let's go up to a high place and look down on events from the beginning of recorded history. We were and still are evolving. God made things very simple at first. Just rules to follow, nothing else. The human line needed laws. If there are no speed limits signs posted, no one is in violation for going 100 mph on the Turnpike. So, the laws told us what sin was.

But God knew we could do better. He wanted us to understand WHY it was sin to break this rule or that rule.

When we raise our children, we first give them rules. Have you ever tried to explain a rule to a 2-year-old? Frustrating, isn't it? Sometimes young parents may try to do just that with their first child, but not with the second child. It just does not work. We must wait until the child is able to comprehend.

But give that child time to grow, time to think, and time to learn and reason. God gave humanity that time. And in His infinite wisdom, He saw when the time was right. As an embryo develops, so did the line of humanity. At the first Christmas, it was time to spread our wings, cease

being slaves to the law, and become children of faith. And we worship our Heavenly Father just as adopted children love their adopted parents.

We are family. Just like we want our kids to be a reflection of us, the parents, should not God want us to be a reflection of Him? If Christ was the embodiment of God, should not we be a reflection of Christ? C.S. Lewis says we should be miniature Christs.

We are family, along with all the imperfections and complicated relationships that characterize real families. Think about us here, today. We are a group of people affiliated not by blood relationship, but by a common spirit.

We are living examples of the difference between 'fitting in' and 'belonging.' To fit in, one must change to be like everyone else. To belong, you recognize that you have a rightful place among the others, even if we are all different. To fit, one thinks of a 'club' atmosphere. An atmosphere where one must live like us, think like us, act like us, look like us. And you pay your dues! In other words, you lose your identity. On the other hand, to belong, your identity is always yours and your place in the order of things is not for others to decide. In God's family, you never lose the uniqueness God gave you.

But the redemption of Christ is the common thread to all who belong to God's family. With faith in that redemption, we are more like the image of Christ than before. Does that mean we now have the 'FIT?' It is not a matter of fitting. It is a matter of belonging because with Christ in your heart, you are more genuinely you than before you knew Him.

Paul mentions Jesus as 'Born of woman...,' meaning his humanness. When you start to see Christ not only as divine, but human as well, then the goal of becoming more like Him seems more and more feasible. And you will become more and more genuinely yourself.

For those of us who have traveled to other cities, other states, other countries, did you see people gathered around Christian churches on a Sunday morning? When you hear testimony from other places about the work of Christ, do you feel a sense of connection, of family? I hope so! Do you feel a sense of sons and daughters of God, not slaves to a set of laws? I hope so.

According to the first few verses of John's gospel, God has a gift for those who believe in his name. The gift was and still is the right to be children of God. Although our bodies are the product of human decision, a child of God is born of God, rewarded for the act of receiving God's gift, believing in his name.

Accepting and believing in his name is just the beginning. It means we are on the road to becoming more and more Christ-like. It is truly a journey with milestones. And we are not alone. We find there are others on that road to Emmaus, talking with each other and learning about the master, feeling an intangible bond among us. We will find no strangers among them. Just family.

Amen.