



February 16, 2014
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RADICAL: righteousness Galatians 2: 11-21

Buenos Dias! Last night, 106 of us returned from our annual high school mission trip to Mexico. For 25 years we have been taking students to build houses in Tijuana. We call them “houses”, but they are really sheds: 11 by 22 feet in size with a concrete floor and a stucco finish. But for these people, it is a luxurious, waterproof, secure mansion. This year, we built six houses. But his trip isn’t primarily about building houses; it is about building students. And in my opinion this was one of our best trips ever. Great worship, great talks, several kids made professions of faith in Christ... it was life-changing.

You’ll hear more from our students next week... with a special visit from Ron Burgundy and his San Diego news crew. But I want to say two things now: First, we made a great decision when we hired Dustin Harrison as our high school Director. He is a spectacular leader. Second, since I know someone is going to mock me about this, I will just tell you that I set the world record for the slowest installation of a door ever. You’ve heard of the Gates of Hell? This was the Gate of Hell. Everything went wrong and, yes, it took me 7 hours to install it and yes, I was heard swearing in tongues and, yes, at one point, I did kick a bucket clear across the house and I’m sorry for being a bad influence on your children. But in my defense... that door was demon-possessed! And I was ticked!

But so was Paul in his letter to the Galatians. I am told that he kicked a bucket clear across the room when he heard that false teachers had snuck in to his new churches in Galatia to undermine everything that he had done. They claimed Paul wasn’t really an apostle; that his gospel wasn’t adequate. And if that weren’t enough to make him mad, a party of hyper-religious Jewish Christians called the Circumcision Group—(do you remember their nickname? Yes, the Snippies)—the Snippies visited Paul’s church in Antioch while he was away. This was a church full Gentiles (that means non-Jews)... and they told them that unless they became Jewish—got circumcised, stopped eating pork rinds—they weren’t really Christians.

These hyper-religious people were so intimidating and judgmental that even Peter, who was visiting Antioch at the time, pulled away from the Gentiles; he wouldn’t hang out with them anymore. Made them feel like second-class citizens. Paul was furious that his Sweetheart church would be treated this way. So he called Peter out publicly.

What did Paul accuse Peter of being? A hypocrite! [*Show mask*] Remember, the word hypocrite meant “actor” or “mask-wearer.” Paul was saying that Peter was wearing a mask—pretending to be extra Jewish so that he would not get in trouble with the Circumcision Group—and in the process, he broke the hearts of the Gentile Christians in Antioch. Any of you ever wear a religious mask? Pretend to be something you are not? Thank God hypocrites are welcome here, because there are plenty of us to go around. And thank God that the Holy Spirit is still working on us; helping us remove our masks so that we can be real before God, before ourselves and before each other.

So that brings us up to speed. But Paul isn’t done laying into Peter. Let’s read the rest of his smack down, and as we do, I want you to look for the one word that describes the obsession that is shared by the false teachers in Galatia and the Circumcision Group from Jerusalem. One word, okay? There will be a test.

So, what is the one word? Law! Seven times the word “law” appears in Paul’s verbal spanking of Peter. It’s a churchy word, but we really need to understand it in order to understand the rest of this letter. What does “Law” mean?

The “Law” refers to the Old Testament rules and regulations that tell how to live in right relationship with God. The Ten Commandments, for instance. But the Jewish scholars made it much more complicated than that. For instance, if the fourth commandment was to rest on the Sabbath, then what exactly was work? How far could you walk? What could you lift? How much could you carry? I remember the first time I stayed at a Jewish hotel in Jerusalem on the Sabbath. I didn’t know what a Shabbat elevator was. Starting on Friday at sundown and continuing for 24 hours, the Shabbat elevator stops automatically at every single floor. Why? Because pushing a button is work! So, since I was staying on the 20th floor, that meant I stopped 20 times before I got down to the lobby. I avoided that elevator after that!

There were also strict rules about eating. We know that Jews don’t eat pork or lobster. But did you know that you can’t have any dairy product at a meal in which meat is served? At dinner time, there is no milk, no ice cream, and no sour cream. Why? Because Exodus 34 says you “cannot boil a baby goat in its mother’s milk.” This becomes a prohibition against any dairy products being served with meat. No sour cream on your kosher tacos!

All these rules can be summed up in the word “circumcision.” When you said “circumcision,” you said it all! Circumcision was the sign of God’s covenant with His people. When “the Circumcision Group” came, they were determined that every single aspect of the Law had to be observed in order to be a Christian... even if you were a Gentile.

We may scratch our heads and think, "This is crazy," but that's how it was. There were 613 specific laws to be observed: 365 negative laws... one for every day of the year. You know how we have calendars with a positive thought for the day? Pharisees handed out calendars with the "No" for the day. There were also 248 positive laws... things you must do. This was very serious business.

You often find Jesus battling with the Pharisees because their interpretation of the Law was so much stricter than God's! For instance, God's gift of Sabbath was so that people could rest and recuperate and worship Him. It was a gift of wellness. What greater gift of wellness could you imagine than to be healed on the Sabbath? To have your paralyzed legs or your withered hand restored? Jesus often healed on the Sabbath and the Pharisees, instead of celebrating this restorative miracle from God, accused Jesus of rule-breaking. It drove him crazy!

Here's the bottom line about the Law as far as Jews were concerned: Keeping the rules was the only way to make God happy. Keeping all the rules was how you became righteous and earned God's favor. If you kept the rules, you were God's beloved. If you didn't keep the rules, you were on God's naughty list. It was like Santa Claus.

Can you imagine any problems with this approach? First of all... 613 rules! That's a lot of rules to remember!!! There might be some like Paul who devoted their whole life to memorizing and keeping the rules. But what about the average Jewish guy who was just trying to make a living... just trying to take care of his family? You couldn't even remember all the rules much less keep every one of them.

But there's a deeper issue here. It's the matter of the heart, and this is the thing that bugged Jesus the most. He taught that it didn't matter if you observed every rule perfectly; if your heart was wrong, you were still guilty. You were a hypocrite. The man who hates his brother is a murderer. The man who lusts after a woman is an adulterer. In other words, Jesus upped the ante on what it meant to be righteous before God. Not only what we did counted, the things we thought counted even more!

After the resurrected Jesus appeared to arch rule-keeper, Paul, it finally became clear to him: righteousness through observance of the Law was impossible. You could not keep enough rules to make God happy. You could not do enough good deeds to please God. You could not undo your guilty past no matter how hard you tried. In other words, the Law is a brutal and heartless taskmaster. The more you understand the Law, the more you realize it is inescapable.

Paul understood that despair. He had observed the Law scrupulously. But he came to understand that the Law was a ruthless taskmaster that might offer freedom... but never delivered. So if you are enslaved to a ruthless taskmaster who owns and abuses you all your life, what escape is there? What was Paul's solution?

Death! Dying to the law. That's how Paul describes his escape from the Law. Verse 19: "...I died to the Law that I might live for God." Paul realized he could never satisfy the Law, never fulfill the Law, never outlast the Law. What was his only solution? Die to the Law, because once you are dead, the Law no longer has any power over you.

How many have ever heard of John Wycliffe? We've all heard of Martin Luther and John Calvin, the great Reformers of the 1500's. But Wycliffe lived 200 years earlier and was already teaching principles that would lead to the Protestant Reformation two centuries later. Wycliffe was known as the Morning Star of the Reformation. He died in 1384 but forty years later, Pope Martin decided that Wycliffe's teachings were heretical. Since he wasn't around to be executed, the Pope ordered Wycliffe's body dug up, burned what was left of it and scattered his ashes on the River Swift.

So here's a question: did that hurt? To have his dead body exhumed and burned... did that cause Wycliffe pain? Did the experience stress him out? No! Why? Because he was dead! You cannot hurt a dead body. Dead is dead. Once you are dead, nothing that threatened or harmed you has any more influence over you. You are free.

The only way to escape the tyranny of the Law—this idea that you have to keep all the rules in order to make God happy—is to die to the Law. Only then, is the Law powerless to harm you. So here's the big question: Who did the dying? Jesus. Look at that majestic verse 20: I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Christ is the only one to have obeyed the Law perfectly. The only one who has been able to satisfy the Father's demand of righteousness. When Jesus died on the cross, he died sinless, and when he rose from the dead, he had fulfilled all the demands of the Law!

This is so important. Please try to get this: When Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ..." he is saying this: when I give my life to Jesus—when I trust him to do what I cannot do: fulfill God's Law perfectly—there is a sense in which I die to the Law. It can't hurt me anymore! Jesus kept the rules perfectly. I can't, but if I surrender to Him—if I allow my ego to be crucified with Him—then the Law has no power over me. I don't have to keep the rules to please God. Jesus already did. All I have to do is trust Jesus to do what I can never do: be good enough to make God happy."

Paul talks about this in a different way in the Colossians: "For you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God." (Col 3.3) The cold weather this winter reminds me of what I used to do with my kids on cold February mornings. They would see me in my big terry cloth robe and run up to me and I would wrap them

inside my robe so that you couldn't even see them anymore. They just disappeared.

This is what Paul is talking about. This is what Jesus does when we run to him. He wraps us up in his robe of righteousness so that we might be saved from the demands of the Law... saved from a hopeless life of rule-keeping.

And do you know what that is called? That moment when we surrender to Jesus, when we admit that we can never be good enough; that moment when the Father looks and sees, not us, but his beloved and spotless Son who hides us and says, "I've got this... this one is mine, Dad. She belongs to me..."; that moment when God says, "Because you are hidden in my Son, I declare you forgiven...." Do you know what that word is? Justification. It's a legal word that means God looks at us, but doesn't see us! He sees His righteous Son and, for the sake of His Son, declares that we are righteous, too.

So if that is so, where is the place for rule-keeping? What authority does the Law have over us? None! We are dead to it, because we are crucified with Christ—hidden with Christ, the only perfect keeper of the Law.

Now, why do you suppose I've pounded away on this Law thing so much today? Because it is the great American lie that we can be good enough to please God. I have lost count of how many times I have asked someone, "Are you a Christian," and they reply, "Yes," and I ask them, "What does it mean to you to be a Christian" and they reply: "I try to be a good person." Wrong answer!

What is talking there? The Law! And it is exactly wrong. You cannot... no one can be good enough to please God, and if you think you can, you are just like the Pharisees. If someone asks you why you are a Christian and your first words are, "Because I try to..." or "Because I do" or "Because I am"...you have just preached another gospel. If you say, "I'm a Christian because I read my Bible or I pray or I go to Mexico and build houses for the poor or I'm nice to my neighbor"—that is a false gospel. You have just joined another religion—any other religion, take your pick—because that is exactly what every other religion in the world is based on: being good enough to make God happy, obeying enough of the rules so that, at the end of the day, my good outweighs my bad.

Only the Christian God says, "Since it is not possible for you to keep the rules, I will keep the rules on your behalf. I will take your punishment upon myself. I will pay the price of your sin. And all you need do is trust me, hide in me, and let me really change you... from the inside out." What is that called? Grace! The only answer to, "How can God be happy with you is, "Because he is pleased with Jesus and I am hidden in Christ." That is the gospel. How essential is it that we understand this? Paul says that if we try to go back to the false gospel—the rule-keeping way of pleasing God—then "Christ has died for nothing!"

Are you a rule-keeper? Are you convinced that you can be good enough to make God happy... that your salvation depends upon you being a good person? That is a sucker bet! It is only the grace of God in Jesus Christ that can save you! Listen once more to the guy who kept all the rules and realized it was hopeless: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

THAT is radical righteousness!

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
 1. What do you think was the most important point in the sermon? Why is it important?
 2. What other reflections do you have about the sermon by Pastor Mark?
 3. How do you think the sermon applies to us as a congregation?
 4. What is it that God wants you to do as a result of hearing this sermon?