

New Testament: Hebrews 11: 1 - 3 & 39 - 40  
Sermon Text: Galatians 2: 15 - 21

Please pray with me. And now Lord God may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be pleasing and acceptable in Thy sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

As we continue our study of Galatians, this week we'll corroborate what we discovered last week by taking a look at Paul's argument for the paramount importance of grace. One of the things about the Apostle Paul that we must remember, and this is what really helped me in my studies in seminary, is that Paul is building and working through what would become Christian theology in real time. So he is quite literally working out his faith, what he believes, without any kind of established Christian thought or theology before him. We have the benefit of thousands of years of Christian thinkers, scholars, writers and theologians who have done much of the heavy lifting for us; Paul included. And so, we approach Paul's letters with humility and with grace ourselves as we consider that he might not quite have everything worked out just yet. He is processing this brand new religion, that will become Christianity, in real time.

We established last week that we had to take a deeper look at trying to understand why Paul was so upset about people forcing or demanding circumcision upon the Galatians communities. In and of itself, it is not necessarily a bad thing. However, the practice becomes a bad thing when it supersedes the efficacious grace of Christ. No action by humans; obeying the law, praying everyday, getting baptized, getting circumcised, voting the "correct" way, can reconcile us to God. Can redeem us. Only God's grace can do that. But there were many in Paul's time, and still are today, who teach that our actions can reconcile us to God. If this is true, then what is the point of grace? This is why Paul is so particularly distressed and in today's reading, he further builds his argument.

So first, Paul distinguishes between grace and the works of the law. Paul uses the word "justified" repeatedly throughout our reading and in his argument. What he is trying to communicate with the word justified is how creation is genuinely and effectively reconciled to God. So when you see the word justified think in terms of what is effective for reconciliation to God. Is our own faith; are our own beliefs, our own works or deeds or actions, effective in reconciling us to God? Or, is Jesus' death and resurrection effective for reconciliation to God?

Paul begins his argument by appealing to his Jewish brothers in trying to establish the connection between themselves as Jewish Christians and the Gentiles who are

confessing Christ and coming to believe in grace. So he's trying to soften them up a bit. He's like, listen we are Jews by birth, not those pesky Gentile sinners, and even we have come to understand and believe that a person is not reconciled to God by works of the law, by doing the law, by obeying the law, but *rather* have come to understand and believe that a person is reconciled to God only by the faithfulness of Christ. He goes on. Even we, as Jewish Christians, have believed in the Christhood of Jesus in order that *we* might be reconciled to God because of the faithfulness of Christ and not because of the works of the law. And he concludes this portion of his argument by reiterating that works of the law are simply not effective in reconciling anyone to God. As such, there is no need for circumcision. There's nothing wrong with it, but there is no need.

Did we catch all that? That is pretty complex and complicated. By all means, print this manuscript out when you get home, re-read back through it and come talk to me if you still have questions or concerns. To summarize: only one thing is effective in reconciling humanity to God; the faith of Jesus Christ who died and rose again from the dead. We cannot do anything, cannot do enough good works, enough obedient works, to reconcile ourselves to God. Instead, we believe in the faithfulness of Jesus who died and was resurrected. The faithfulness of Jesus the Son to carry through God the Father's plan for reconciliation to God by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul continues his argument with a "what if?" scenario. His Jewish Christian brothers call Gentiles "sinners" so he's like, what if, as *we* pursue reconciliation to God ourselves we too are found to be sinners? What if it is found out that it is simply impossible to follow every single word of the Law codes which, in failing to do so, would make Jewish Christians sinners themselves? Well, since Jesus was a Jew and came to the Jewish people first before his mission to the ends of the earth would the Jewish people sinning make Christ himself a minister of sin? The question is, of course, rhetorical. Of course not! Since this is the case the next line of Paul's argument is a type of contrary reasoning. Jewish Christian brothers, if Christ is not a minister of sin, which he's not, then why would you return to the law? He's saying that if you rebuild the law that Christ wholly and completely fulfilled, then *that* is what makes you a transgressor because you're going backwards, not forwards. You're going away from justification, from reconciliation to God, instead of towards it. The law has been fulfilled by the same Christ whose faithfulness reconciles us to God; there's no need to rebuild what has been fulfilled. There's no need for circumcision. So, as Paul has done, die to the law! It is not effective for reconciliation to God. Die to the law so that you might live, be reconciled to God, in Christ! Don't live this life in the flesh by the law that you have died to, but live this life in the flesh according to your belief in the effectiveness of Christ's resurrection; live this life in the flesh according to grace! v. 20b

Paul rounds out his argument by flatly refuting the claim his opponents, the pro-circumcision party, are making against him. In arguing the need for circumcision they would logically argue that Paul, by refuting the need for it, is nullifying or negating the grace of God. And so, after this argument we've just broken down in favor of the efficacy of God's grace and grace alone, Paul concludes by saying first, just so we're clear, I do *not* nullify the grace of God. Secondly, to ram his point home and even turn the screws a little bit against those Jewish Christians refuting him, if reconciliation to God came through the law, then Christ died and was resurrected for no purpose. Thereby making this all null and void. If we can reconcile ourselves to God by obeying the law, praying everyday, getting baptized, getting circumcised, voting the "correct" way then there is no need for the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The love of God is from everlasting to everlasting. There is no end to God's love, grace and mercy. Let us live lives in the flesh governed by love, grace and mercy. Amen.