

June 19, 2016 “Before And After” Galatians 3:23-29

There is need to offer some explanation as to why this portion of the New Testament was given to us by the Spirit of God, through the apostle Paul in the first place. Faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour had taken root in the Roman province of Galatia. The balance of the converts...at very least a majority were Gentiles. That simply means that by race and culture they were not Jews. Regardless of their racial heritage their culture was for the most part Greek in nature, as that culture had been adopted for the most part by the Romans, and carried by them to their conquered territories. While the Romans succeeded in conquering the Greeks politically, the Greek culture became the dominant culture of the Roman Empire, and as a general insight, even today, the culture of the western world has its roots in the dominance of the culture of Ancient Greece.

Now Paul the apostle was Jewish in his racial and cultural background. He was opposed by other Christians of Jewish background who took the position, that Gentiles could not be saved even if they believed in Jesus, unless they observed the Old Testament Law in its entirety...being circumcised, keeping a Kosher kitchen, which means adopting Jewish customs to food and obeying the restrictions in the Old Testament Law to the last detail, and of course keeping the Jewish feast days...for example Passover, and Hanukkah. They attacked the apostle Paul as a traitor to his Jewish roots and created division in the church, over Paul's authority as a Christian leader.

Now if you ask the real question, how did that affect believers, here is the answer. It created a division over who were the real Christians, disciples of Jesus. Purity as defined by who? It

robbed the believers of their joy. It replaced conviction about being saved from sin, with the question, what more must I do? Works, deeds, keeping a check list, become more important than faith in the Saviour. It dilutes the power of the cross. These are really significant things. Paul blew a gasket...I mean he got very angry. If there is a single theme to the Galatian letter it is that we, like Paul, are saved not by what we do, but by our putting faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

The portion I read to you from the Galatian Letter by Paul makes the point that the cross of Christ literally divides time into before and after. Philosophically, it is the whole reason that time became measured in terms of B.C. (Before Christ) and A.D. (in the year of our Lord). Modern scholars in the attempt to secularize those obviously Christian designations came up with the latest trend of B.C.E. (before the Christian Era, and C.E. (the Christian Era). Like most of the measures the secularizing movement attempts to put in place to take God out of the equation, it is only partially successful. And I take that as a real sign of the Sovereignty of God. You can try to ignore God. But it is almost impossible to pull it off.

For Paul this was a really big issue. He had spent the balance of his adult life as an active Pharisee. He was circumcised. He did keep a kosher kitchen. He endeavoured to observe all the laws of the Old Testament and the Feast Days. And he opposed the early church as a head hunter. He would take lists of Jews who had become Christians and try to hunt them down and bring them back to Jerusalem to stand trial. His goal was to wipe out the movement. In the midst of that endeavour, Jesus risen from the dead, confronted him on the Damascus Road, made him instantly blind, and restored Paul's sight through the ministry of Christians. And Paul discovered

the joy and freedom of being forgiven for the first time, through faith in Jesus. It changed His life.

And as most of these Gentiles who were being harrassed and threatened by these Judaizers had come to faith under Paul's ministry, Paul like a protective mother, did everything in his power to stop the efforts of the Judaizers and re-enforce the Gospel, the truth as he knew it, to encourage these Christians who were under attack.

Paul makes it as plain as he can. Before faith in Jesus came into his and their lives, they were prisoners of the rules of the Law in the Old Testament. Keeping score. I kept these rules, I broke those, I have to do better. I have to work at making myself holy and holier all the time. Here is one of those places where it is easy to get confused. On the one hand, the commandments of God are important and not to be set aside. On the other is this reality which the Old Testament testifies to as clearly as the New does in its Gospel accounts and letters, only God can save the lost. Only God can redeem. We will never arrive at peace and joy through our own efforts at giving ourselves peace and joy.

You know the saying, Money cannot buy happiness. Some people add a second clause: Money cannot buy happiness, but it helps. As the Bible makes clear again in both the Old and New Testaments Happiness, or Blessedness is a spiritual value that can only be received, rather than achieved. I am going to say that again. Happiness is a spiritual value. You can only receive it. You cannot achieve it. In other words God Himself gives us happiness. Peace. Joy. We receive those things in the midst of the journey of life, by God's being with us, blessing us, keeping us, sustaining us. We do

not get happiness or peace or joy as a result of our efforts to achieve happiness, peace, or joy.

That is precisely what Paul discovered on the Road to Damascus. Jesus came into His life in spite of his attempts to destroy the Jesus movement and deny that Jesus had risen from the dead. God in Christ apprehended Paul on the Road to Damascus. And God in Christ, crucified and risen, gave Paul in a moment of recognition, everything he had been pursuing for the balance of his life and failed to achieve. Paul became a Christian, a disciple of Jesus, a follower in faith, because for the first time in his life he experienced blessing, blessedness. Call it happiness, call it peace, call it joy. He felt new. He felt clean. He was sure in his mind that God was pleased with him. That God was his friend. The Spirit of God was with him and in him. And Paul never looked back. Never reconsidered. Never wanted his former life.

In fact it is accurate to say, the apostle Paul rejected his life before faith in Jesus. As had Peter and James and John and the other disciples before him. As had that number of 120 who followed Jesus from place to place. They did not know what to do when Jesus was dead and buried, but the resurrection reality rallied them....forever. And that is the Christian experience.

So Paul says with the clarity of his own experience in Christ, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus." He is not saying you women have been changed into men. He is saying we all have been adopted as the children of God. And at the same time he is saying, given the world of his time, (and this is really radical thinking for his era): the status of men has changed. And the status of women has changed. You are the children of the redeeming God,

and no one can take that from you.

To a polyglot church, now made up of Jews and Gentiles from many racial backgrounds, he says in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek. The racial labels do not count any more. What counts is that you are the children of God through your faith in Jesus. I am glad I am Canadian. I am glad I am a citizen of Ontario. But neither of those labels means to me what it means to be a child of God through faith in Jesus. That last reality, child of God through faith in Jesus has to do with blessedness. Has to do with Happiness. Has to do with being at Peace. Has to do with everlasting Joy. And those are not things I have achieved. They are realities I have been given, through faith in Jesus, in the reality of the presence of God's genuine, Holy, Spirit.

Before race was everything to Paul. After faith in Jesus, race just is not that important. He is Christ's man. He is a member of Christ's family. That is what the church is which is why we must not get territorial about the superiority of our branch of the family tree. And if you want radical thinking Paul is radical. After faith in Jesus class distinction fades in importance. He says there is neither slave nor free. Your Christian brother and sister are your brother and sister. What the world order calls their social class is not important. In fact it is so much gas. Vapour. Radical thinking? Yes radical. Rooted in the truth. Rooted no less, in God. After faith in Jesus, the distinction between men and women disintegrates.

Women understand better than anyone, how long it has taken the words to be given the weight they truly deserve. We are living in an era where a woman is going to be one of the candidates for the most powerful political office in the world. It should not

have taken this long. But the reality is it is happening. And the greater reality is, it is happening more than anything else because God is real, and Jesus saves, and neither sex is superior to the other. Jesus saves both. Period.

Here is the bottom line. You are the heirs of the promise made to no less a man than Abraham. You are the inheritors of the Kingdom of God. You are joint heirs. That means you have to play nice if you are going to enjoy your new status. We must work together, regardless of our racial backgrounds, regardless of our social class, regardless of whether we are masculine or feminine, regardless of what we believe ourselves to be. Regardless of what we think we are worth.

Facts. We are made out of the dust of the earth. We will become dust again. And yet...we are and we will be....servants of the King, children of God.

Let us pray;

Heavenly Father you have given us so much more than we deserve. It is tempting to us because we are flesh and blood, because we are dust, to want more than we think we have. To want to be more than we think we are. Help us to remember we are yours. And therefore we possess more than we could ever know and more than we could want in our wildest dreams. To you, our Lord and our Redeemer we offer the praise of our lips, and the service of our lives. Amen