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Galatians 4:21-31

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Have you ever been surprised by the behaviour of someone you know? You haven't seen them in a long time, but when you met them they were so nice to you, so kind to you. Maybe you were impressed by their faith and by their Christian kindness and charity. Maybe it was a whole congregation. You spent time with them and thought, "These people really know Jesus. They really live Jesus. They understand grace and love." Maybe it was that they were committed to the Scriptures, diligently seeking to know God's Word and to live by it. And then some years later you talk to someone else who found their way into that congregation and they describe something very different. The people were unkind to them. These people who were so kind and welcoming towards you now want nothing to do with your friend—she's not good enough for them. You're shocked and you think there must have been a mistake and so you write to your old friends to ask them what's happened, why they were so unkind, and they write back to tell you that they've since had more and better teaching and they've advanced and matured in their understanding of the Bible. And you write back and say, "But what you're describing isn't the Good News we all once knew so well—it's another Gospel!" And in response you get a letter now rejecting you—these friends who used to be so kind, whom you thought you knew so well, now want nothing to do with you!

Something like this happened to Paul and it's what prompted him to write his Epistle to the Galatians—a group of churches that Paul had founded in

what's now central Turkey. When Paul had first arrived in Galatia years before he was in really bad shape. We don't know exactly what was wrong since he does give specifics. He may have been sick, but it's more likely that he came to them injured and beaten up. Think of 2 Corinthians 11 where he describes having been stoned, whipped, beaten with rod—multiple times and almost to death. There's a good chance Paul arrived in Galatia after one of those episodes. Most people would have avoided him. Good people, they would have known, aren't stoned or beaten by the authorities. Most people would have been afraid to associate themselves with Paul lest they end up being arrested and beaten themselves. But these people in Galatia took him in, they welcomed him, they took care of him, and in return he preached the Good News. They saw something in Paul. In 4:14 he describes them welcoming him as if he were an angel or even as if were Jesus himself. He says that they cared so much for him that they would have gladly torn out their own eyes to give to him—they would have done anything for him. But something happened. Now they despise Paul, they speak against him, and they treat him like an enemy. What happened?

In the first four chapters of Galatians Paul steadily makes his case against what had happened in these churches. What we see there tells us that some new group or some new teacher had arrived. This new group was Jewish and was teaching that in order to *really* be a follower of Jesus you had to be Jewish or, if you were a Gentile, you had to convert to Judaism. That meant living according to the *torah*—to the law that was given to Israel through Moses at Mt. Sinai during the Exodus. In the First Century, the Jews especially emphasises three things that set them apart from the Gentiles, mainly because they were so obvious in that culture. Those three things were circumcision, observance of the Sabbath, and their diet—the food they ate and didn't eat.

This wasn't really a new problem. The first Christians were all Jews. When they became Christians it wouldn't have occurred to them that they were ceasing to be Jews because of their conversion. Jesus never told anyone to stop being Jewish. No. What he did was to show people how to be faithful as Jews. He came, as we read a couple of weeks ago, to the lost sheep of Israel to teach them a new way of being Israel. But that new way of being Israel—of being faithful to God's covenant—meant being a light to the nations, to the Gentiles, so eventually the Church was going to have to figure out how this new way of being Israel related to the old *torah*-centred, law-centred way of being Israel. It was Paul in particular who hammered out a solution and that solution centres on the nature of the Church as one. There is *one* Church. The Lord only has *one* people. Jesus only has *one* body. And so Paul stresses so many times and in so many ways: in Jesus Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, man nor woman, slave nor free. The Church is one. Jews don't have to stop being Jews. Romans don't have to stop being Romans. Greeks don't have to stop being Greeks. And that's because there's nothing about being a Jew or a Roman or a Greek on which our life in Christ depends. There may be aspects of being Jewish or Roman or Greek that Jesus' people need to give up—old sources of security, sinful ways of life, and idolatrous attachments—but a Jew can follow Jesus as Lord by being circumcised just as well as a Greek can trust Jesus as Lord being uncircumcised. A Jew can trust Jesus as Lord while not eating pork just as well as a Roman can trust Jesus as Lord by covering everything he eats in fermented fish sauce—something the Romans unfortunately did a *lot*. The problem arises when we start thinking that to really be a Christian we *have* to do or not do these things and start dividing up God's people over these differences.

This is what happened in Galatia. Jewish Christians showed up and started teaching that if you *really* wanted to be a Christian you had to be a Jew. They created two classes of Christians. Those who were circumcised and observed the Sabbath and observed the Jewish dietary rules—they were the inner circle, they were the *real* followers of Jesus. Everyone else was on the outside. Reading between the lines in Galatians, we can gather that one of the main reasons these “Judaizers” were doing this is that they either feared persecution by the Jews—maybe stonings or beatings as had happened to Paul—or simply being kicked out of the synagogues and shunned by their Jewish friends and family. But this was turning everything Jesus taught upside-down. Remember: Israel’s calling from day one, the reason the Lord had called her and made her his people, was so that he could redeem her, make her holy, and send her out to be a light to the nations. Instead, as Jesus said, she put her light under a basket. She kept it to herself and then had the gall to look down on and to condemn the Gentiles for being lost in the dark. Jesus came to get Israel back on track, back to being the light of the world. But now these Christians in Galatia have adopted the very same attitude and are doing the very same thing that got Israel into trouble in the first place. They’re keeping their light to themselves. Instead of taking the light to the Gentiles, they’re forcing the Gentiles to come to them. Even worse, they’re forcing the Gentiles to become Jews before they’ll be allowed even to see the light.

These people in Galatia considered themselves to be big on the law, so here in our Epistle Paul takes them back to the law in what is the culmination of the argument he’s been building since the beginning of the letter. Look at Galatians 4:21-22:

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman.

When the Jews talked about “the law” they were talking about the first five books of the Old Testament. Israel’s story begins in the book of Genesis and it begins with Abraham. Paul takes the Galatians all the way back to the beginning.

Remember that Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were elderly and childless—that was part of the Lord’s miraculous plan. He came to this old man and promised him that he would have a son and that through his son he would become a great nation and have descendants as numerous as the stars and as numerous as the sand on the beach. But years and years went by and Abraham and Sarah only got older. They still had no children. They knew what the Lord had promised. They had faith in that sense, but Sarah started thinking that maybe the Lord’s plan wasn’t for a miracle after all—maybe he expected them to take things into their own hands. She came up with the idea that Abraham should father a son with her slave-girl, Hagar. Abraham decided it was a good idea and did just that. His son, Ishmael, was the result. But if you remember the story, you remember that things didn’t turn out well. To be barren in those days was a curse and a shame for a woman and Hagar lorded her son over her mistress. Eventually Sarah did miraculously conceive and Isaac was born. That he was miraculously conceived and that his mother was Abraham’s actual wife made it clear that Isaac, not Ishmael was the son the Lord had promised. Eventually, things got so bad between Sarah and Hagar that Hagar and Ishmael were sent away to fend for themselves in the wilderness. Eventually Ishmael’s descendants would be the fathers of the Arab tribes.

It’s a safe bet that the Judaizers in the Galatian churches were using this story to justify what they were doing. They saw two churches, one Jewish and one Gentile and both claiming to be Abraham’s children. They saw themselves—being Jewish and having a biological connection, being circumcised, following all the rules—as the true family or the true children of Abraham. The uncircumcised Gentile believers were like the sons of Ishmael. Yes, they had a connection to Abraham, but like Ishmael, they were out there on the fringe in the wilderness. If they really wanted “in” they needed to be circumcised and to start following all the rules, especially the rules about food and about the Sabbath.

But Paul won’t have any of this. “Okay,” he says, “Let’s run with this thinking. Maybe Abraham does have two families here in Galatia. Look at the story again—you’re big on the law, let’s go back to the law and see which one of these families belongs to the slave woman and which one belongs to the free woman. He writes:

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. (Galatians 4:22-23)

Isaac was free. Ishmael was a slave. And where did they stand in relation to the Lord? Paul says that Ishmael was born according to the flesh. The Lord had promised Abraham that he would have a son, but Ishmael wasn’t that son. Ishmael was the son born when Abraham took matters into his own hands. Isaac was the son born of the promise, the son miraculously born of Sarah when she was ninety-nine years old. They could all agree on things this far. But now, in verse 24, Paul says: this is an allegory. In other words, if you’re going to use Isaac and Ishmael to represent the factions or the

split in Galatia, let's make sure we're applying the symbols to the right people.

Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. (Galatians 4:24-25)

Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia. What does that mean? This is one of the problems with the lectionary taking these passages out of context. To understand we have to go back to Chapter 3, where Paul talks about the purpose of the law. Paul tells us that after God called Abraham and gave him his mission, something had to be done to preserve his people—to keep them set apart—until the fulfilment of the promise came. That was the purpose of the law. It was like a teacher-guardian—something wealthy Romans would have for their sons; sort of a cross between a tutor to teach them and a bodyguard to protect them. That's alright for a time, Paul says, but the problem is that children under a guardian might as well be slaves for all the rights and freedom they have (or don't have, as the case may be). In the first part of Chapter 4, Paul explains that when the time was right, God sent his Son to redeem those who were under the law and, through his Son, to adopt them as his own children. Through Jesus Israel finally came into her inheritance—or, more specifically, all those who put their faith in Jesus and his new way of being Israel, finally came into their inheritance. So the law was in force from the time of Moses to the coming of Jesus, but rather than setting men and women free, it more-or-less enslaved them. There was a good reason for that at the time, but the law isn't the fulfilment of God's promises—the law isn't Israel's inheritance: Jesus is. These people in

Galatia are convinced that to be faithful to Jesus they still need to live under the law, but what Paul's saying is that just the opposite is true. Hagar represents Mount Sinai in Arabia. Hagar represents the law that the Lord gave there through Moses and just as Hagar, being a slave, could only produce children who were slaves, so the law can only produce slavery. In fact, Hagar, he says corresponds to Jerusalem—the one situated in the Roman province of Judea, the one Jesus said would shortly be judged and destroyed for having rejected him. Do the Galatians *really* want to insist that that's what it looks like to follow Jesus?

In contrast to Hagar and in contrast to the present Jerusalem she represents there's Sarah.

But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written, “Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear;

break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.” (Galatians 4:26-27)

In verse 27 Paul is quoting Isaiah 54:1. Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians. She was desolate and barren, but through Isaiah the Lord promised she would recover: you will have children again, no matter how unlikely it looks. Jerusalem in Isaiah's day was a lot like Abraham's wife Sarah. Sarah was old and hopelessly beyond child-bearing years. Jerusalem was beaten down and destroyed, the people taken away into exile and her situation was hopeless. But God had promised both that he would give life—and he did.

These agitators in Galatian saw themselves as working on behalf of Jerusalem, but Paul reminds them that Jerusalem stands condemned. Like Ishmael she has no inheritance. The

Lord's inheritance promised to Abraham belongs to Jesus now. He is Israel and he's inaugurated the Lord's kingdom. The old Jerusalem is waiting for her condemnation, but the new Jerusalem sits prepared and waiting in heaven—in God's realm—waiting for the day when she will return to an earth made new, following her Messiah as he returns in victory. That's where true Christian hope lies and it's also where true Christian citizenship lies. And in verse 28 he tells them: You, my brothers and sisters, are children of the promise, like Isaac. Whether you realise it or not, there aren't two classes of Christians. Either you're with the old Jerusalem and with Ishmael and awaiting judgement or you're with Jesus and therefore with the New Jerusalem and children of God's promise to Abraham—just like Isaac.

Finally, Paul warns the Judaisers. They think they're doing the Lord's work in trying to make good Jews of all these Gentile believers, but they'd better watch out. They'd better think about which side they're taking. Paul writes:

But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.” (Galatians 4:29-30)

Abraham cast Hagar out of his camp. Hagar and Ishmael were causing strife and Sarah was afraid Ishmael might steal her sons rightful inheritance so she had them sent away. And Paul warns the Galatians: If you're part of this group that thinks of the Gentile Christians as second-class you're on the wrong side. You think you're Isaac—you think you're the free sons of Abraham—but in reality you're Ishmael—you're the slave-children

and, like Hagar and Ishmael, you may one day find yourselves cast out!

Finally, Paul stresses in verse 31 and in the first verse of Chapter 5:

So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Paul was as Jewish as they came. He had been a member of the Sanhedrin. If anyone had a right to side with the Judaizers it was Paul, but instead he sides with the Gentiles. He says, *we* are not children of the slave, but of the free woman. *We! All of us!* Circumcised and uncircumcised, Sabbath observing and non-Sabbath observing, bacon eating and non-bacon-eating, Jew and Gentile, if we're in Jesus, God's Son, then we are his adopted sons and daughters and there's no two-tier system. Either you're in Christ or you're not. Again, Jesus only has *one* Church; he only has *one* body; he only has *one* people.

Over this last week I was pondering the application of this passage today. In some ways the Seventh Day Adventists or the Messianic Jewish movement have some parallels with the Judaizers in the Galatian churches. We certainly do well to steer clear of them, but I don't think that's an issue for most of us. But what Paul stresses here also reminds us more broadly of the centrality of grace and of the unity of the body of Christ. In fact, one of the reasons Paul stresses the unity of the body of Christ is because that unity is one of our most powerful witnesses to the world around us. The world is divided over everything. It's divided into nation state at war with each other. It's divided into political parties at war with each other. It's divided into economic and social classes at war with each other. It's divided by race and language and culture. It's even divided by age. Just this week a popular pastor caused a

stir on the Internet with a sermon in which he told parents that they're selfish if they want to attend a small church. You have to have a big church, he said, because without a big church your kids will be lumped together into on big youth group or Sunday school—middle schoolers and high schoolers forced to be together. And that's bad, he says. I've noticed the trend more generally. Some churches have separate groups just for the youth that they actually advertise as a separate church or congregation. God forbid our teenagers might have to worship with us old fuddy-duddies!

Brothers and Sisters, that's not how the Church is to be. In Jesus there is neither Jew nor Gentile. Neither is there twelve-year-old nor octogenarian. We are one in Jesus. If we're splitting up because of our ages, we're undermining the unity we have in Jesus and in doing so we're undermining our witness to the world. The same is just as true when we segregate ourselves by race or culture or language, by politics or by nation, by economic or by social status. A church that courts the wealthy and the good-looking while ignoring the poor and the unattractive is not being the Church. The church that panders to generational difference is not being the Church. The Church is made up of all those who have given up everything else in order to follow Jesus in faith. Yes, some are more mature and more knowledgeable in the faith than others, but there are not first-class and second-class Christians. If we're judging faithfulness to God by cultural standards, we're doing it wrong. And the mission Jesus has given us is a mission to proclaim the Good News of his saving death and resurrection to the world—not just to the people we like, not just to the people who are like us, not just to the people who are comfortable for us, but to *everyone*.

Jesus has united us to himself by pouring the Holy Spirit into us and the

evidence of the Spirit is not circumcision or uncircumcision; the evidence of the Spirit is the profession that Jesus is Lord, it's the fruit we bear: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. And that proclamation and that fruit are meant to transform the world. In Jesus we are inheritors of the promises made to Abraham. We are to be a light to the nations, a witness of God's glory to *all* people.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, as we make our way through Lent and are reminded of our sin, remind us also of your grace. We deserve death, but instead you have sacrificed your own Son in order to give us life. And as we remember the grace you have given in Jesus, remind us that we can take pride in nothing—not in who we are, not in what we've done, not in our status or even in our standing before you as redeemed people. Let us find our identity in Jesus alone and in his grace and as we do so, give us grace to love each other as unconditionally as you do. Make us truly one that our unity in the midst of a divide world will make Jesus known. Amen.