

The Test

A Series on the Letter to the Galatians

Message 4 – “Painted into a Corner”

Galatians 3:23-29

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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Good morning and welcome to St. Paul’s Church. My name is Matt Skillen and I am one of the pastors here. We are so glad you have joined us for worship today. I have the humble joy of sharing God’s word with you today. Before we dive in, would you join me for a word of prayer?

“Lord, open Your Word to us, and us to Your Word.”

As a middle school English teacher, I began my career during the era of ‘No Child Left Behind’. This was a good law that set out to do some remarkable things, but I think it had some flaws. The new law inspired my school to adopt the mission “Failure is not an option.” Which meant that we were going to do all we could to help all students succeed.

Later in life, I believe this mission in my profession led me to develop a real fear of failing. It was a mentor that I later met who said, “If you never fail, you will never truly learn.”

In every test, failure is an option, and this week we are in week four of a sermon series we are calling “The Test.” In this series we are carefully considering the remarkable change that we are living in during what many consider to be a time of tremendous turmoil and uncertainty. Our culture seems to be challenged on many fronts, and while none of this is a surprise to God, it has served as a remarkable shock to the system for many of us. As I look back to March 2020, I feel like we were moving right along and then out of nowhere the wind was knocked out of us and we’ve been trying to catch our breath ever since.

As Pastor David said at the beginning of this series a few weeks ago, if we’ve been listening for the voice of God during this rather unique time, we may be feeling that God isn’t saying much, or He isn’t saying what we expect him to say. If we know anything about testing, it’s that every teacher is quiet during the test. When we are in a test, we can feel really alone. Just talking about it reminds me of how nervous I was to take an exam when I was in college. In order to allay our fears, I had a great professor named Dr. Tim Frey who would say at the start of every test:

You can look down in desperation,
up for an explanation,
but you may not look side-to-side for inspiration.

During this test that we are in, I believe it is important for all of us to look into our hearts and make every effort to align ourselves to God. He is why we are here, and He has charted a path toward where we are going. While we might often look down in desperation, these are rather significantly trying times, we might also look up for an explanation. However, and I think this is really important, in this context (and I think even Dr. Frey would agree) we should also look side-to-side at one another for inspiration.

The implications of this test are great. The entire world is looking at the church to see how it will respond in times of great challenge and conflict. How do we treat one another? What are our priorities?

In our fourth installment of “The Test” we continue our examination of Galatians 3. If you’ve been tracking with us for the last several weeks, you know that the Apostle Paul is writing to the Galatian churches in this text and he has some strong words about their actions. You see, after Paul left Galatia to minister to another group of people, the Judaizers moved in to preach a false gospel to the Galatians. Paul preached that through faith and belief in Jesus Christ as their savior, the Galatians had received the greatest gift—redemption. God had forgiven their sins and their place in eternity had been sealed. The Judaizers, however, came in with a different version of the story. Their literalism taught that anyone who wanted to be truly saved must adopt the Mosaic Law, that is, to say they need to adopt the traditions, practices and laws of the Hebrews to be a Christian. Many, if not most, in Galatia adopted this idea and Paul writes this letter in response, pointing out their mistakes.

Last week we discussed that the Mosaic Law played an important part in preparing God’s people after they had been freed from slavery. The strict dietary, social and spiritual laws were designed to help separate the Israelites from their 400-year history as Egyptian slaves and mold them into God’s royal priests. That was the intention of the law and it was meant to be in place until Jesus Christ, the Messiah, arrived to usher in a new life for God’s people.

Paul’s ultimate message in the third chapter of his letter to the Galatians is that **faith trumps law**. Now that isn’t to say you should break the law for your faith. We have an entire series we posted online during the month of April that outlines the importance of authority in our lives. But in the

context of the Galatians, Paul is saying that your faith in who God is and what he can do is far more important than any religious ceremony or doctrine one might follow.

As a poet and literature teacher, I always have an ear to song lyrics that seem to capture the message of God in our culture. It doesn't matter who wrote the song or what their initial purpose was for writing it, I believe the voice of God can ring through music and poetry in profound ways. Poetry has a way of opening new avenues to the heart, and God can shake the very core of our souls through the right combination of words that seems to hit us when we least expect it.

A line that I came across recently in a song by John Reuben called "Curious (Pt. 1)" is

**Don't cross lines you can't come back from
Don't draw so many lines that you can't move on.**

Several images came to mind when I first heard this line of lyrics, but the prevailing image that I see now every time I listen to this section of the song is that of **someone who has painted himself or herself into a corner**, which sounds like an awful thing someone might do. But if you've ever heard anyone say or do anything that resembles hypocrisy, chances are they have figuratively painted themselves into a corner and see no real path out of the situation they have created for themselves. In order to get out, they break through a wall or they walk all over the paint they just laid down on the floor. And we are left to wonder why.

If the conditions that we are now living in, and the pandemic conditions that we've lived through, have revealed anything, it is that we, the church, need to be free of our contradictions, we need to stop painting ourselves into a corner, so that we can best serve the world of hurting, lonely and lost people. So, how do we sort this out? What is the test that we are facing into?

The question that I want you to consider today is this, **are you free?**

Are you free from the bounds that once tied you down? When you look in the mirror do you see a beloved child of God? When you are alone in your thoughts, do you take an opportunity to dwell in the Kingdom of God? Are you free today?

In last week's message, we took a look at Paul's rather critical and heavy-handed view of the law that the Judaizers brought to Galatia. What was this

law? This was the long list of rules and regulations the Hebrew people lived under after they followed Moses out of Egypt. If you want to read more about it, check out the book of Exodus. It's such an amazing story. It's so amazing, in fact, that they've, quite literally, made several movies depicting this monumental moment when God's people were liberated from over 400 years of slavery. After their liberation, God delivered a set of rules, the law that was in large part a covenant with the Israelites. These rules were established so that God's people would be reoriented to Him and leave their years of slavery behind them. The law had a specific purpose, but its purpose was meant to be temporary until the Messiah, Jesus Christ, came to Earth.

As Paul read about the Galatians and how they had strayed from the original teachings he left with them, I believe he was struck with the same question. **Aren't you free? If you are free, why put yourself in bondage?**

Remember, earlier in this sermon conversation we found that Paul doesn't believe the law on its own is a curse on the Galatians. However, he is concerned that when one puts him or herself under it, the law can become overburdensome and could become yet another condition we put on those who desperately need to come to know that name of Jesus. And this is a lesson I think we can learn a great deal from in the church today.

In the conclusion of Galatians 3, Paul puts a finer point on his critique by explaining in verse 23

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. (Galatians 3:23)

Paul continues to use strong language to describe the law. He says before faith came, that is to say before Jesus Christ came and we saw faith in action and faith grounded in our association with God on Earth, we were imprisoned. What does that mean? Well, according to the tradition and law, we were bound to the sins we committed.

Paul says, further, that we were then guarded under the law. Which, if we take this literally, sin kept us in bondage and the law stood guard. That doesn't sound all too comforting... that is, as the word says, "*until faith would be revealed.*" And what a reveal that was!

You see, before Jesus came to serve as the ultimate sacrifice for our sins, which we believe is seen in his life here on Earth, death on a cross and resurrection, God commanded his people in the Old Testament to conduct an animal sacrifice to communicate to his people the very seriousness of sin. If

there were no sacrifice then sin might be minimized and God's people might become complacent. Before Jesus's redemption of our sins, we were bound to a law that held us to a pretty significant burden. Thankfully, Jesus came. And through his beautiful sacrifice our sins have been forgiven. We are no longer tied down in bondage and the law no longer stands guard. Paul doubles down on this point in the next three verses of text. He says,

²³Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. (Galatians 3:24-26)

It is, indeed, by our **faith** that we find our freedom from the bondage of sin. It isn't through our actions, through our particular worship style, through our social associations, through our talents or treasures. Our freedom isn't found in our bank accounts or calendars. It isn't found in our success or failure; it isn't found in the approval we seek from others or the political party that happens to be in the White House or the state capital. No, our freedom is found in our faith that Jesus is the Son of God and that his death and resurrection erased our sins and crystalized our eternity in Heaven forever. That is who our God is and **He** is where our freedom comes from.

That bears repeating:

Our freedom is found ONLY in our faith that Jesus is the Son of God and that his death and resurrection erased our sins and crystalized our eternity in Heaven forever. That is who our God is and **He is where our freedom comes from.**

I think we sometimes let our religion get in the way of our true and unending devotion of Christ. This was Paul's concern of the Galatian people, and it may well be something we need to consider as well. WE invite everyone to worship with us, so long as they look like us, worship at the same time as us and come with a similar world view. We let human problems (both big and small) derail our faith journey. Whether it is the fear that incapacitates us or our lofty ideals, maybe we fall victim to the divisive culture that now disrupts our every waking moment, or we begin to believe the lies that we hear that tell us we are not good enough or strong enough to prevail. In each case we will paint ourselves into our own little corner and wonder why it is so hard for us to move forward. We don't want to touch the fresh paint and we simply can't move on.

If you are stuck. If you feel trapped. If you haven't found freedom in anything else, Paul saw this in the Galatians too as they were getting bogged down by the new laws they were living by in an attempt to appear more holy

and devout. He says something quite revealing in the remaining verses of this chapter. He says,

²⁷As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:27-29)

Everyone who has been baptized in Christ, that is to say anyone who has committed his or her life to the faith, is now clothed, or completely covered, with Christ. It doesn't matter who you are, what worldly status, where you are from. God knows you. He sees you. In Isaiah 43 it says that **God calls us by name.**

This is a tremendous thing to consider. In our day and age when we are about to tear ourselves apart because we've believed the lie that our differences somehow outweigh our similarities. You don't have to look too far to see how angry and divided our community has become. While I don't have a great deal of time to parse out why this might be happening or what it might mean if we continue down this road, I do know this. When we fight with one another, we are not aligned with God's heart, and we are further burdening ourselves with the earthly laws and conditions that have nothing to do with our eternity in heaven.

Paul says it best. When we are clothed in Christ the differences that we once saw in one another no longer matter. If you are truly free, I invite you to share that liberation with someone else who then might share it with another. Friends, if we can commit to that we might see the day that we are truly united in Christ together.

Because of the great sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross God doesn't call us adulterer or glutton. He doesn't call us American or foreigner, He doesn't call us loser or failure. **He calls us by name.**

Let that sink in for a moment. If this is true, and I believe it is, that means that in all of creation, all that God created, he still calls you by name. You are never lost. You are never alone.

Are you free? Or do you feel trapped in a corner. God calls us by name. That is the freedom we have, and it is the freedom we should seek. It is the freedom we should want for one another.