

“Seeking Favor”

Reading: Mark 2:13-17; Galatians 1:1-12

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Today we begin a series of several weeks in the book of Galatians. The reason is that history repeats itself: the controversies of the past are so often the controversies of the present, and their mistakes become our mistakes if we aren't careful. The situation being dealt with in Galatians is something quite foreign to us, and on the surface it might seem irrelevant. But though the setting is different and the characters have different names, the plot is something we might find ourselves caught up in with new characters in our setting. So we learn from our spiritual ancestors what paths we ought to take, and which ones we would do well to avoid.

Galatians was probably one of the earlier letters written by the Apostle Paul, probably written even before any of the gospels we have recorded in our Bible today. Scholars aren't entirely sure exactly where the church was that Paul was writing to, but it was probably somewhere in modern day Turkey. Like any letter, there's a reason it was written: a controversy has arisen, and Paul as a major leader among Christians in the Roman world is trying to set things right in this church that he feels so connected to. The controversy is something that takes some translation for us; it's not immediately obvious why we should care about it. But again, history can repeat itself. There are a lot of quotable quotes in Galatians, but they're made all the more powerful when you take the time to learn what they mean in the context of the larger issue.

Paul has spent years of his life planting churches all around the Mediterranean, instructing new believers, and calling people to come to faith in Christ. The core of his message has been that God has begun the work of new creation through the work of Jesus, and because of Jesus, everyone is invited to be a part of that new creation. One of the places Paul did his work was in the region of Galatia, so he had a deep personal connection to these people. We learn from elsewhere in the letter that apparently Paul had become seriously ill while he was there, and they took care of him. But now, some time after Paul moved on to plant more churches elsewhere, another group of people has come along behind him and started adding to the message Paul gave the Galatian Christians.

Again, the message Paul preached to them was that everyone is invited to come be a part of God's work through faith in Jesus Christ: if you take Jesus at His word when He says He's the way to God, you're in. But these other people said that yes, Jesus is truly God's anointed one, but in order to follow Jesus you also need to follow the Jewish law. Paul doesn't record all the specifics of what these people were teaching the Galatians, but we can get the gist of it because this was apparently a fairly common controversy among that first generation of Christians. Jesus was a Jew, and Christianity at first was not seen as a new religion, it was a sect among Jews. But as people like Paul began to preach the message of Jesus to people outside of Judaism, the question became whether these new believers had to become Jews in order to become Christians. Jesus was a Jew, and at first pretty much all Christians were Jews, so nobody really stopped to think about the mechanics of how Gentiles were included. One view was that non-Jews became Christians by first following the instructions of the Torah, including things like the laws on what you could eat and how it was prepared, what holidays you celebrated, and how you worshipped.

It's more than just a controversy over faith versus works, which is how it's often portrayed. Preachers often preach this as being a debate over whether you are saved by doing enough good things to earn your way to heaven or just believing in Jesus and letting Him do all the work for you. There's some truth to that, but it's not really the point. It's really a question of how God brings us into His people. What marks you as a Christian? What is the sign indicating that you have gone from death to life in Christ? What initiates you into God's family? Is it the Torah with all of its instructions, or is it something else? In the case of the Galatian church, the issue came down to male circumcision: are you marked by the physical signs of the covenant with God, the physical mark of circumcision and with it the other physical signs of the laws of kosher and so on, or are the marks something different? The gospel Paul preached was that the Holy Spirit of God marks you because you have placed your trust in Jesus, and that mark is available to all who will receive it. This other group came along later and convinced the Galatian Christians that Paul's message wasn't enough, that Jesus wasn't enough to know God, that they needed to do something more to earn God's favor.

We'll be spending more time over the coming weeks diving deeper into what Paul has to say to this group of people, but we start our series today by beginning where Paul begins. Before you ask how to know God, you first need to ask who you're going to listen to as your authority. There are lots of people with opinions about how to know God, so who are you going to trust? Paul and the gospel he preaches, or these other people preaching Jesus *and* the Jewish law, or someone else, like the Romans with their gods or Buddhists or atheists or someone else? Why do we take Paul's word for how to know God? There were lots of other interpretations of Jesus in those early days; who's to say Paul had it right?

So as Paul seeks to convince the Galatians to return to the true gospel of Jesus Christ, he begins by trying to convince them of his authority. Much of this first chapter consists of him re-telling his story of how he went from being one of the most committed persecutors of Christians to becoming one of their most fervent preachers. Much of his case rests on the fact that he has given them the gospel he received directly from Jesus Himself. Why trust what Paul has to say about Jesus? Because Paul is telling them what Jesus has to say about Himself.

But again, why do we care about a long-dead controversy? It might be of interest to students of church history to know what sorts of things they were arguing about nearly two thousand years ago, but what difference does it make for us? Because the plot is the same, though the characters have different names. One of the things we notice right off the bat in this letter is that the debate is not only about requiring new converts to be circumcised or not, it's about who your spiritual life is centered on. Paul puts it in terms of who you're trying to impress. Whose favor are you seeking? Are you seeking God's favor, or the favor of humans?

Fortunately for us, that first generation of Christians settled the question of whether you have to follow the Jewish law or not, but the deeper question of whose favor you're seeking is one we still struggle with. Paul is pointing out to the Galatians that for some people, religion is subject to the approval of humans, and so what you do with your spirit is determined by what is acceptable to whatever social group you're trying to please. That's a big part of this controversy in the Galatian church: the people who are preaching that new believers need to be circumcised and follow the other Jewish laws are doing so because they want to win the approval of other people. Later on in the letter, Paul says that their motive is to avoid persecution. It was more socially acceptable to be a Jew

than to follow this newfangled, unpredictable religion of Christianity. The result was that the confrontational nature of the message of Jesus became both watered down and less relevant.

But from literally the first verse of the letter, Paul makes it clear that he's preaching a different message. He calls himself an apostle "sent not from humans nor by a human, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father." Right from the start, he's making a clear distinction. At the end of our reading, he reinforces the point: "Am I trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ." And then again, he insists that the message he gives them comes not from any human, but from Jesus Christ directly. Then, as he tells his story, again and again he emphasizes that he moved in response to the direction of Jesus, not because of any instructions from humans. He tells of how he debated with the pillars of the church at Jerusalem, "those who were held in high esteem," about whether new believers needed to follow the Jewish law, and though they agreed with him at first, he later confronted them for going back on their word. They were refusing to eat with Gentile Christians because they were more concerned about winning the approval of Jewish factions.

Whose favor are you seeking? God's favor, or the favor of humans? Because that's the core of this ancient controversy that has been settled for so long. It's far from irrelevant. We don't still have people arguing that Christians need to follow the Jewish laws, but we do still have people arguing for additions to the gospel message that are really more concerned with seeking the approval of humans than they are with seeking God's favor.

Let me give you an example from our own history; I could give some even more current ones if I really wanted to step on some toes. At one point in the history of the Wesleyan Church — and some of you remember this — it was forbidden, at least in some areas of the church, for a member or a pastor to own a television. It was a big deal. These were good Christians seeking to be holy people, and I respect them for that, and we owe them a lot, but in their quest to set themselves apart as holy people, they went too far and they added a burdensome barrier to following Christ, an external sign that could win you the favor or the disapproval of your fellow Christians. There's certainly room for a discussion about what sorts of things are healthy to watch on your TV, but it seems frivolous to us today: making ministry dependent on the ownership of a television set is obviously an unnecessary barrier to the gospel of Christ. It wasn't frivolous to them — one conference said TVs were "a Satanic miracle to wreck the Christian faith." They took this seriously, but now we realize how legalistic that sort of requirement was.

It's about seeking God's favor versus seeking the approval of humans. It doesn't mean you're seeking to be *popular*, because I'm sure there was nothing popular about forbidding TVs or getting circumcised; it means you're relying on human judgments about what should and shouldn't be included in the path to God. So how do we tell the difference? How do we examine our own lives to see whether we're seeking God's favor, or we're slipping into the trap of legalism or some other way of seeking the approval of humans?

There's a key difference between the two. There's a key characteristic, if we're looking closely. Seeking God's approval often involves transgressing boundaries boldly, but not for one's own gain: we cross boundaries to offer hope and salvation to those who are trapped on the other side of the boundaries. Seeking the approval of humans, on the other hand, often involves building new

boundaries or adding new requirements to God's kingdom so that I and the people I like can consider ourselves further in the kingdom than others. So, though it seems paradoxical, setting our focus on pleasing God leads us to focus on others, particularly those who are lost. If we focus on winning the approval of others, we will paradoxically end up being more self-centered.

Jesus made it a point to eat with tax collectors and sinners, with people who were by nature excluded from being a part of God's family. When the Pharisees, some of whom were so consumed by their own sense of righteousness that they put a lot of effort into building barriers for other people to climb, questioned Jesus, He said that "it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Later, He crossed the geographical, ethnic, and gender boundaries of His time to have a spiritual conversation with a Samaritan woman of ill repute, and He offered her salvation and hope. In Acts 4, Peter and John find themselves standing before the ruling council, justifying their actions in healing a lame man in the name of Jesus. And their response? "Which is right in God's eyes, to listen to you, or to Him?" Which matters more, God's approval, or the approval of a human tribunal?

Paul tells the Galatians that Christ has set us free from the law, and it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. The only thing that counts, he says, is faith expressing itself through love. The freedom we have in Christ, he says later, is for serving one another humbly in love. "The entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: Love your neighbor as yourself." So whose favor are you seeking? Are you more concerned with what pleases God, or with what pleases humans? Do you build barriers to hope and salvation, or do you boldly cross those boundaries to offer hope in Jesus' name?



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