

“The Danger of a Small Table”

Reading: Matthew 20:1-19; Galatians 2:15-21

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Now that we have a baby, of course there have been some changes around our house, especially as Junia has become more mobile. One of those changes, and maybe the one that causes my dog the most consternation, is the addition of a baby gate at the top of the stairs. My office is right at the top of the stairs, and so often during the day while I'm trying to get work done — emphasis on *trying* — Junia is crawling around playing and getting into things. So, naturally, since I'm convinced babies have a radar tuned to whatever is most dangerous in their vicinity, Junia loves to crawl over to the gate and pull herself up on it. Of course we've been trying to communicate to her that she can't do that, and the gate is secure enough that it's probably not going anywhere, but even so, we now have both the gate and another barrier in front of the gate at the top of the stairs. So we have the gate to keep her from falling, and the barrier to keep her from getting to the gate. We have both the law — don't climb on the gate — and a fence around the law to keep Junia from coming close to breaking the law. It's a cumbersome burden, but it's there for a good reason.

But not all fences around laws are equal. Some of the Jews living in the first century, and even some of the Christians, if we understand some of the things Paul is writing about in Galatians, were very zealous to put fences around God's law to make sure no one slipped up. God's people had the Torah, the list of laws and conditions that marked them as set apart as God's people, and the Torah covered all kinds of very specific things. But in a lot of cases, people thought it might be wise to not even come close to breaking the law: if God set the speed limit at 55, they would make their own speed limit at 45 so they wouldn't even come close. Their intent was good; we can give them the benefit of the doubt. They weren't trying to earn their way to heaven, they were trying to make sure they were marked as belonging to God. But in their zeal they often went too far, and they made God's Torah a burden and an obstacle to knowing and serving God.

What's more, in some cases these laws and even some of the fences around them got carried over into the early church. Like we said last week when we started talking about Paul's letter to the Christians in Galatia, the first Christians weren't starting a new religion, they were Jews who believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Jewish Messiah. And then when Gentiles, non-Jews, started also believing that Jesus was not only the Jewish Messiah but also the Lord of all creation, the question became how (and if) these non-Jews should be brought into God's covenant with the Jews. Do they need to follow the Torah? Do men need to be circumcised, and carry on their bodies the physical sign of being set apart for God? Does everyone need to follow the laws of kosher dictating what you can eat and how to eat it? As we learned last week, this is not just an academic question that is no longer relevant to us. The details aren't up for debate any longer, but there's a question at the heart of this ancient controversy about whose favor you're trying to win. Are you concerned with pleasing God, or are you trying to win the favor of other humans through your virtue or your religious practices?

In our passage for today, Paul goes even deeper into the issue. His point is that you can't be justified by the works of the law; you can only be justified by faith in Christ. But what on earth does that mean? He's using pretty technical language, and we have years of misunderstanding his meaning mucking things up. The reading I usually hear goes something like this: justification is when God makes it “just as if I'd” never sinned, and He does that not on the basis of the things I've done or the

things I deserve, but based on whether I believe in Jesus instead. It's as though, because of Jesus, God gave me a "get out of hell free" card." And that understanding isn't entirely incorrect, but that's not really the thrust of what Paul is saying here.

Instead, this fifty-cent theological word "justification" really refers to how we know that we are the people of God. To be justified is to be vindicated. Being justified means that God has looked at our court case, and based on His own faithfulness to the promises He's made through the ages, God affirms that we are indeed His people, that our enemies of death and hell have no claim on us, and that God embraces us for all eternity. The question Paul and these Galatian Christians are struggling with is how to know, before the end of all things when God actually makes that final judgment, that we are justified: do the works of the law signify that sort of a relationship with God, or is faith in Christ the sign of that relationship? Paul says without hesitation that it is faith in Jesus Christ.

So it's not so much an argument over doing things to earn your way to heaven versus "just believing," as we often understand this passage to say. It's about recognizing and embracing your family members. But once again, as we asked last week, why is this an issue? Why was it an issue for these early Christians, and why is it still relevant for us today? Because we're not necessarily much better at recognizing our kin – or, maybe even worse, our *could-be* kin – than the Galatians were.

Let's go back to the parable we read from the teaching of Jesus. He tells the story of a landowner who hires workers for his vineyard but can't, for some reason, find as many workers as he wants. So he keeps going out throughout the day to hire more and more workers, and by the time he gets to the last few hours of the day, he's still hiring. It's a fair guess that by that point in the day, you're not getting the most motivated employees around, but he still hires them. When it comes time to pay them, all the employees get the same pay, regardless of how long they worked. And from that parable some people take the message that you should be a good worker for God no matter what, that no matter how much you sacrifice for God you should just be grateful for your pay. Some people take the parable as a reminder of the gratuitous nature of God's grace, that He gives people far more than they have earned.

And while those are valid lessons, there's a different focus when you get to the end of the parable. The focus ends on the workers who were hired first and their reaction to this apparently unfair pay scale, to which the reply is that everyone is getting paid exactly what they were promised. It's worth noting that immediately after Jesus tells this parable, Jesus reminds His disciples that He will be condemned to death by the religious leaders of the day. This is a parable directed at the Jewish people of Jesus' day, the nation that had sacrificed and suffered and been defined by their covenant with God for hundreds of years: they were the workers hired first, and Jesus is telling them that there are more workers coming into the vineyard, and they ought not be upset at God's generosity.

In other words, when we in the church read this parable, we often take it to be a reminder to lifelong Christians not to be upset when other people come to faith. Yes, you've been a Christian all your life, but yes, God will be just as gracious to the lifelong scoundrel who has a deathbed conversion, so don't be jealous or begrudge God's grace. That's not incorrect, but the real message for us today is that you are not one of the early workers in the vineyard, no matter how long you've been a Christian. Unless you are Jewish by birth, you are automatically one of the latecomers. Almost all Christians are the latecomers, the recipients of God's superabundant grace, because we have been

grafted in to God's covenant family through the work of Jesus. So don't be proud of your spiritual merit badges or rank, be grateful that you got in at all, because God has been very "unfair" in your advantage.

So what does that have to do with Galatians? The passage we read in Galatians is set in the context of the controversy Paul had with some other church leaders, and he's telling the story to the Galatians because it's relevant to their situation. Remember, the Galatian Christians have been misled into thinking that new Christians need to be circumcised as the sign of their initiation into God's family, saying in essence that following the Jewish law is what shows that you belong to God. So Paul tells them about his debate with Peter and James, two of the most prominent leaders in the first church. They had agreed with Paul that Gentiles could be included in God's family through Christ, but then Paul caught Peter refusing to share a meal with Gentiles because he was afraid of what other Jews would think. Peter, one of the most important and prominent of the followers of Jesus, was in essence reinforcing the dividing barrier between Jews and Gentiles through something as simple and as profound as eating a meal. Jews don't normally eat with Gentiles, because Gentiles don't follow the food laws; that's one of the main ways to show that you are set apart as a Jew. Through his actions, Peter reinforced this. Paul called him out on it, using the words we read today.

Paul's message was that Peter and the others had better not get too caught up in their status as the first workers hired in the vineyard. That's not what earns them their pay; it's the generosity of the owner that counts, and He has chosen, through Christ, to be just as generous to the latecomers, you and me. The works of the law do not justify you; they don't mark you as being a member of God's family. No, Paul argues, only faith in Christ marks you. So don't huddle up around your table, Peter. Don't close ranks and exclude the latecomers because they don't follow your rules. And likewise, Galatians, don't insist that those rules are required of new believers, or else you're saying in essence that Christ died for nothing.

What does this mean for us today? It means we'd better beware of having a small table. We get confused about what role we play in that parable of Jesus. Especially those of us who have been Christians for a long time, we can start to think of ourselves as some of the early hires in the vineyard, and we forget that we are in fact getting in by the skin of our teeth, here purely because of the grace of the owner. And if I'm here because of the grace of God, I have absolutely no reason to keep that grace to myself. I have absolutely no reason to begrudge God bestowing His grace on anyone He chooses, and I have every reason to open my arms wide in embrace of anyone who comes to the table. They may not know which fork to use, and they may not know the proper table manners, but they're welcome.

So the message for us today is not just the good news that you can get into God's family without having to do all the work of earning your way in. The reality is that has always been true; even for the Jews living before Jesus, the covenant they had with God was an act of God's grace on their behalf, and the laws they followed were what marked them as God's family, not the means for their salvation. The real message is that there should be room at our table, that we should not put up barriers to people joining us in the meal, that our priority should be making room for new family members to join us rather than coming up with reasons to keep them out.

So as we think about our own lives and the life of our church, how much room is there at our table? Do we have house rules that make it unnecessarily difficult for people to join the meal? Do we make room for people who come? Is there even a seat for them at the table? And maybe we're thinking, "Well, sure there's room for them, we have plenty of empty seats, and here we are just waiting for them..." But the message of Christ calls us to more than just sitting and waiting. There can be many subtle ways to exclude and marginalize newcomers to the table. And beyond that, we need to remember how recently each one of us has come to the table: each one of us is the recipient of extraordinary grace. Someone made room for you at the table, so rather than sitting and waiting, maybe we can get up from the table from time to time and go out looking for someone to invite.

This is more than just a church growth strategy, or just a way to be nice and welcoming to visitors. This is part of our reaction to the frightening and unpredictable world around us. Our response to violence and fear and division is not by participating in the darkness or running in fear from the darkness, but by being the welcoming community of Jesus Christ. In a world where powers and principalities and individuals and armies declare that you must die, or you must leave our borders because you are not like us, we respond by being crucified with Christ, and inviting our enemies to the table. Our welcoming community is a message to the powers of darkness in our world that God's power is greater. Let's be that kind of community.



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