

## **“The Brotherhood of Man”**

*Reading: Isaiah 55:1-11; Galatians 3:23-4:7*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Our passage from Galatians for today includes one of the verses we use as part of the foundation of our affirmation that women can and should be ordained for pastoral leadership. It's sadly still an open question among some Christians. There are some who build intricate theological houses of cards on the belief that women are intended to be eternally subordinate to men purely by virtue of their sex, but thankfully there are many branches of the church that recognize in Galatians 3:28 and other verses that God's intent is much greater. We affirm women in ministry not just because anything a man can do, a woman can do just as well. We affirm women in ministry not out of some desire to bow to a feminist agenda or modern political sensibilities. We don't affirm women in ministry because we're henpecked men who are afraid of their wives. No, we affirm women in ministry because we recognize that this verse and others like it in the New Testament show us that any gospel that maintains or reinforces barriers between people based on anything other than commitment to Jesus Christ is a false gospel. Any gospel that sorts people into categories of being more or less able to serve God or reflect the image of Christ is a lie from the pits of hell.

This is not actually a sermon about women in ministry, though it has implications for women. Galatians 3:28 proclaims that in Christ, there is neither male nor female, neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free. We are all one in Christ Jesus. It's inherent in the work of Jesus; because of what Christ has done, these barriers have been demolished, and anyone who tries to rebuild them is preaching lies and proclaiming that Christ died for nothing. We don't deal with institutionalized slavery any longer, and the vast majority of Christians today are Gentiles, but some Christians still struggle with the divide between male and female, and we may even have added some of our own more modern dividing walls to the list.

We've spent several weeks in Galatians, an ancient book dealing with an ancient controversy that was long ago settled, but which still seems to crop up in our lives in new and modern forms. The Apostle Paul is dealing with a congregation of believers who have started well but were then misled into believing that new Christians had to follow the Jewish laws in order to be marked as belonging to God. It was a debate over how to tell who was in and who was out: you could claim to be a Christian, but if you didn't show the external signs of adherence to the Jewish law, according to these Galatian leaders, you were not fully in God's family. And once again, the details of the debate at that time have long since been settled, but the question of whether you need to add anything to faith in Christ as a sign of belonging to God is still one that pops up from time to time. How much does someone need to look like my picture of a good Christian before I'm willing to call them my brother or sister in Christ? How much does their behavior need to match the standard I set for them? And when we get to leadership, are there even more external standards of behavior and appearance to set in addition to faith?

Paul makes it clear over and over, in no uncertain terms, as forcefully as he can, that the only sign needed to prove that you are in God's family is faith in Christ. Adding anything to that is a false gospel, and Paul uses some strong language to make his point. The initial debate was over Jewish laws, but when we get to our passage for today, Paul expands his point. Not only is the barrier between Jew and Gentile abolished in Christ, so too are the barriers between slave and free, and male

and female, and Paul surely implied even more. These are culturally unequal relationships in which one person would be automatically inferior by virtue of their status: in a Jewish culture, Gentiles were automatically second-class, and vice versa. Women were automatically second-class in comparison to men, and of course slaves, even slaves who eventually received their freedom, would never have the position in society that freeborn people had. That's how human society works. That's how it has always worked. Even today, in supposedly democratic societies with universal human rights, some people are more equal than others by virtue of their age, sex, race, wealth, or location. But Paul is saying that everyone who is in Christ is one.

What do you have in common with a person on the other side of the planet, someone who doesn't speak the same language as you, whose skin may be a completely different color, whose notions of culture and family and morality and government may be completely different, whose food and dress and manner of living are unrecognizable to you? Yes, you may be the same species, but who cares? You may have biology in common with all other humans, but what difference does that make? We share a large amount of genetic material with all kinds of animals that we wouldn't be interested in building bridges with. Even the most cursory glance at human history shows that while we are a social species and our societies and cultures are part of what set us apart from most other creatures, we are almost always social only with those like us. If you're not like me – if you don't look like me, or speak my language, or share my culture or my values – then you're not really to be trusted, and you might even be feared and threatened with violence.

History is full of cultures that have existed by building walls to keep others out. We know who we are because we're not like *them*, and we know who *they* are because they're on the other side of some physical or mental border we've set up. And for those who think human society is making progress, it may be true on the whole, but even now we have a presidential candidate who's built his campaign on the promise of building a wall with Mexico, and we've watched as the UK votes to leave the European Union, leading other nations to consider the same thing, while Scotland and Ireland debate leaving the UK. We even hear rumblings from time to time about Texas leaving the United States.

What do Jews and Gentiles have in common? Why should slaves and free people be treated the same? Why should men and women respect one another as equals? Though our world does its best, it so rarely has a satisfactory answer to that question. There are vague notions of the "brotherhood of man," a phrase which itself leaves half of humanity out. "We share a common humanity," some people might say. But what do we have in common? And if I or my family or my nation can get ahead by trampling you or your family or your nation, what do I care about our shared humanity? There's an old saying that "dignity and an empty sack is worth the empty sack;" in the grand scheme of things, the virtue of our shared humanity is only worth the good it can do me.

But here in Galatians, and at the heart of the gospel itself, we see a different way to live. Paul is not just saying that Jews and Gentiles have equal human rights, or that men and women deserve equal pay, or that slaves and free share a common humanity. He's not relying on some vague notion of the brotherhood of man, that we have to say we're all equal only because the alternative is so much worse. He's saying that we are one *in Christ*. He's saying that the call of Christ is open to everyone, that the inheritance of Christ's kingdom is available to all, that the boundaries and walls put up by this world are smashed to pieces in God's family.

And what's more, this has always been God's plan, as long as we're paying attention. This didn't just start with Jesus. We read from Isaiah 55, which comes in the middle of a beautiful section of Isaiah; it's worth reading the chapters before and after it to get the whole beautiful song. We could go back to chapter 53, where Isaiah sings of a suffering servant of the Lord who is crushed, afflicted, and despised. This servant of the Lord is cut off from the land of the living, and yet, Isaiah says, because he poured out his life unto death, God will nevertheless "give him a portion among the great." The song goes on in chapter 54, where the barren woman, who would normally be looked down upon in her society, is called to sing for joy, because "your Maker is your husband," and He will have compassion on her and increase her family. In chapter 56, eunuchs and foreigners, those who would by law be excluded from fully entering into worship of the Lord, are welcomed into God's presence. And in the middle is chapter 55, in the passage we read, where God promises to summon "nations you know not;" the invitation is given to "come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters." In other words, it has always been God's plan to send out the invitation to bring more and more people into His family, to break down the barriers that divide them, and to make them all His heirs.

Paul describes this as being "clothed" with Christ. Does this mean that we're simply wearing Jesus like a costume, and that we're no better than people outside the church who only pretend to have something in common with other people? Does being clothed in Christ mean nothing more than wearing a cross necklace? Christians are often accused of being hypocrites; is Paul referring to only a surface change, a mask of niceness that hides the nastiness and judgmentalism within? Absolutely not. Being clothed in Christ is far more than a surface change. Ancient baptism in the church often involved a removal of all clothing before baptism, and then after baptism you were clothed with new clothes. It's a visible sign of a much deeper reality. Here in Galatians Paul is using the image of putting on the new clothes of adoption: you're adopted into God's family, and so you dress like you're the heir of His kingdom. Being clothed in Christ is the visible sign of your new status. Paul often spoke of resurrection as being "clothed," and resurrection involves being remade into a new creation, so when he uses this sort of language he's talking about a profound change in your life. It means to live like adopted children and heirs, and our new identity as members of God's family is more defining than anything else.

Maybe we can say that those clothes cover over any other clothes you're wearing, or that you have to take off any other clothes to put on the clothing of Christ. The clothing that identifies you as being male or female, the clothing that identifies our race, the clothing that identifies your social status – all of those things are made irrelevant in God's kingdom.

This means several things for us today. First, don't doubt that you can wear those clothes. Our world loves to tell us what we can and can't do, and who we can and can't be. Our world speaks of democracy and equality while also building systems that oppress and preaching the message that you have to look and act a certain way to fit in. Our world preaches the brotherhood of man without good reasons to back it up, and then lives according to the old ways of pitting one group against the other. But in Christ, Paul says, there is a different way. There is no brotherhood of man, there is only the offer of Jesus for all who will come to wear the clothes of His Father. So no matter who you are, no matter what the world has told you, no matter how you have been sorted, no matter what group you belong to, you are welcome to put on the clothes of Christ. Black, white, male, female, rich, poor, fixed, broken, normal, weird, and on and on: the invitation is for you to come to Christ, to lay your life

at His feet, to die to yourself through baptism and be raised alive again in His name, and to put on the clothes of Christ.

Second, learn to live in those clothes. I've noticed in my time here that family is important to the people in the Poconos. The Argots, the Keipers, and the other families that have lived here for generations take their families seriously. And likewise, those of you who have moved here more recently often host your families when they visit, or you travel to see them regularly. Family matters. But here Paul is telling us that even more important than the clothes of your earthly family are the clothes of your adoptive family. Your commitment to Christ binds you much deeper than any genetics. And the same can be said of the other clothes we wear, the costumes, the uniforms, the badges of life. We are always learning what it means to wear those clothes *under* the clothes of Christ.

And third, learn to recognize those clothes on others. Paul's goal is to get us to recognize and celebrate the work of God in other peoples' lives. They may not look like what we expect them to, but if they are in Christ, they are our brothers or sisters. And in Christ, we have a unity with other people that we could never have anywhere else. It is in God's family that the brotherhood and sisterhood of humanity is fulfilled and given true meaning. There is no us versus them, there is only those who are in Christ and those who are *not yet* in Christ. There is no cause for us to feel superior to those who are not yet our siblings in Christ, or to feel defensive, or to attack them. Our call is to witness and pray, because if slaves can be co-heirs with free, and males can be co-heirs with female, and Gentiles can be co-heirs with Jews, then God can do the miraculous work of adoption for anyone.



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