

LESSONS IN LIVING

From Rules to Principles

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Readings: Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Galatians 3:23-29 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Do you ever think back on times in your life when you had a decision to make? It may not have seemed important at the time, but looking back you realize that your whole life may have been different if you had taken a slightly different path? I was thinking the other day about an episode that happened when I was very young. My parents always told me to "obey elders". There was an older kid in our neighborhood; I'll call him Stan, which is not his real name. Stan was a very mean kid. He came to me one day with a jar that had something pink in it, and he said "let's poison Buddy." I was young enough to not know what *poison* meant. I said, "Will that hurt him?" Stan said, "No, it will be fun." Stan gave the pink stuff to Buddy, who then reacted in horror and pain. Buddy ran towards his house and Stan ran in the opposite direction. At that point I had a choice; which one of those was I going to follow or would I just stand where I was. I went running with Buddy, the young kid who had been poisoned. I told the parent what had happened and they found the substance.

I think my life would have been very different if the story had gone in the other direction. You forget about those stories, but they come back at night. When I was in grade school and they talked about the Holocaust, the first response I had was, "could that happen to me?" That is what most people think of when they hear about the Holocaust. But I think because of that earlier experience, I asked a different question too. I asked, "Could I have done that to someone else?" Could I, through just being obedient, just being a good citizen, just being a dutiful follower, have done something like that? It is a very frightening question and a lot of the theology that has developed over the years has been trying to answer that question. How can we look at Christianity in a way that makes that the most unlikely? I have never been able to completely digest the fact that many of the people who followed Hitler considered themselves to be Christian. They sang the hymns that we sing and said a lot of the creeds we say.

I have always felt that there has to be something deeper that we are being called to. I have mentioned in this series that there were three questions I asked my Sunday school teachers which they could not answer. First, how do you know this isn't all made up? Second, even if it is true, why do I need this stuff? The third question, which we are looking at today, is who says? Why should I trust that authority? I was taught, to be a good child means to be an obedient child who is quiet in class and doesn't ask too many questions. What I realized was, that is what goodness meant in Germany. Just cooperate, do your job, but don't put the pieces together or look at the whole scenario. I couldn't help but feel called in a different direction. Realize that when they were persecuting Jewish people, they didn't just call them Jewish people. They called them terrorists. A bomb goes off in a village over there and if you don't want that to happen to your home or family, than you have got to stop this danger. I am sure they called them something akin to illegal aliens; anything to unsettle people and to get people to lash out in fear without thinking or questioning.

One thing that has really come home to me is that the people who killed Jesus were all good citizens. They were believers in their religion, who did not question their leaders, but were obedient and dutiful. In a sense what Paul is going to talk about here, when he talks about a *call to freedom*, puts us at odds with what most of us were taught that religion is in the first place. We are taught that religion is supposed to fit into the culture seamlessly and the good person, good Christian, good citizen or good American, is the same thing. Paul will show us that not even being a good Christian can answer this call. We have to go deeper.

What Paul is trying to get us to do is to translate our idea of what it means to be happy. Paul is seen as a fuddy-duddy. Most of you were taught a view of Paul as a guy who doesn't want you to have fun and is always trying to catch you in your mistakes, but that is not really what Paul is doing here. In this book of Galatians, Paul is calling us to freedom. He is saying, "For freedom Christ has set you free. Do not return to a yolk of slavery." By slavery, he means *religion* as it is taught in tradition. When Paul says that the law was given to us as a babysitter, which would be the translation of the word monitor, as a guardian, but now that faith has come we are no longer responsible to that guardian that was a very radical statement in its day. It said the Ten Commandments were given to you as training wheels on your bicycle, but if you are going to be a loving person you have to get beyond them. They can tell you what wrong is, but they cannot tell you what right is. That has to come from a deeper place.

Paul knew freedom is a very tricky thing, just like happiness is a very tricky thing. We can do something and think we are free, but become more and more trapped. How many of us have tried to live out of our instincts and called that freedom? Let fear make the decisions. Let greed make the decisions--and became less and less happy. How many of us have followed our addictions and habits, hoping that they would lead us to freedom or something that would make life worth living only to learn it didn't? What Paul is saying is the happiness we are really longing for requires a discipline. He is not slapping us on the wrist. Life will do that. Life is what gives us the spanking. Paul is trying to avoid that by helping us see the link between our discipline and happiness as well as our addictions or instincts and our unhappiness.

Paul is saying that we are called to freedom which means we have to take responsibility for our lives. As children we cannot do that. Paul recognizes that you have to start with rules and beliefs, but we need to outgrow that initial religion. We have to if we are going to follow Christ into this loving world view. We start by seeking happiness. Hopefully, we start small enough where we are not hurting other people as we seek happiness. But, a Christian is not being called just to be good. A God who loves you, wants a whole lot more than that. A God who loves you, wants you to be happy as well. Goodness is a way of getting to happiness in Christianity. You have probably been taught to feel guilty to even pursue happiness, but it is your happiness that will help you realize what makes somebody else happy. By taking care of, healing, having joy for yourself then you can recognize it in others.

When we simply try to be good mechanically or do the rules so we don't get the spanking, we end up being cruel to ourselves and to each other. There is a hot and tot saying which says, "Good is when I steal your cattle. Bad is when you steal mine." Chesterton said, "If a man were to shoot his grandmother at a range of five hundred yards, I should call him a good shot, but not necessarily a good man." What Paul is doing is saying that ideas like happiness need a little bit more explanation because I can be happy in ways today that make me miserable tomorrow. So Paul says there is a discipline to hold on to happiness. I can be happy in a way that separates me from you, but my deeper happiness is going to need you as well.

Paul starts with a personal view of Christianity. It starts with a view of Jesus, who is not just a historical person. It is a symbol of the greatness within you and me. Jesus is a symbol of a complete human being, so even when we are afraid or angry, by remembering the face of Jesus we remember our own greatness.

We may not be able to live there but we can reorient ourselves and turn back towards it. That happiness then, when we live it out with other people, deepens and we have a bigger view of what happiness means. Sometimes I give up short term happiness for long term happiness. Sometimes I give up private happiness for communal happiness because the more I live; the deeper I go into it, the more I recognize that is my true greatest happiness. But it is not complete until it includes everyone. The mysticism of Paul, I believe, when he talked about the Body of Christ, he was talking about the whole world and everything in it.

The church, very understandably, has defined the Body of Christ as itself. Good business move, but has that led to the kind of world or church that Christ calls us to be? No it hasn't and it can't. Sectarian religion is a cancer. It is okay to be a cell and have boundaries, but if it is not serving the whole it is a cancer. What is a cancer? It is a cell that replicates on its own plan. A person who is not consecrated and dedicated to the common good may be a wonderful person, but it is a cancer in the body. A family may be very nurturing and loving within its own walls, but if it is not consecrated to the common good it is a cancer because as it replicates it starts bumping with other families. A nation which is not consecrated to the common good is a cancer to the common body. And most of all, a religion that sees itself as the only way, that does not consecrate itself to the service of all, that does not by "Christ" mean everyone and everything, is a cancer. And that religion boundaries what we mean by ethics and it allows us to treat the people we love one way and the people that we don't love in a different way.

When Paul talked about the Body of Christ he was talking about something mystical. He is not saying to join the church--that can be a way to do this--but if a church only initiates you into itself it has betrayed you at a fundamental level. The baptism that Paul is talking about is into life itself, into the common life to be transformed and renamed. That is what baptism means--to leave behind the separateness, the clutching, the fear, and to come into the common life--that is the calling. That is why they called it *good news*. Have you ever wondered why they call this good news? Love God and if you don't then you will be burned for all eternity? God was so mad at you that Jesus stepped in and said, "Daddy hurt me, don't hurt them!" But God is love. When we look at Paul we realize there is something a whole lot deeper.

Play like you have never been in a church before and hear these words. "Each one of you is a child of God [it's not just Jesus] because of your faith in Christ Jesus." Not a historical person, but that universal sympathy that Christ lived in. "All of you who have been baptized into Christ [the mystical body] have clothed yourselves with Christ. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor citizen, male or female. All are one in Christ." Does the church teach that? No Jew or Greek?—no, you are supposed to convert the Jews, and we don't know who the Greeks are (laughter). No, you stop looking at people with sectarian eyes. You see them as your brothers and sisters and more than that, you see all of us as branches on one tree. And I believe not just people--we will not find the compassion to stop hurting each other until we can feel our relationship to all of life. We can't be cruel to the animals and kind to one another. We lose the litmus test, which is the sensitivity to suffering. "No Jew nor Greek, slave nor citizen, male or female." It means you can't just be a member of a country because in that you can either be inside or out. You can't just take up ethics as a male or female.

We have two choices in life. You are going to die. You realize that right? You are going to die. I say that about once a month. It is kind of important, but we leave that out. The fact that you are going to die means you have two choices. You either are going to die of something or for something. You are either going to die of something, holding back from life, trying to protect everything until it is ripped out of your hands, or you are going to turn in the other direction and say, "I am a cell in the common body of life and I joyfully give myself as a gift to the rest of it." Because we realize Paul isn't talking about sacrifice, he is

talking about joy--they are not two separate things. There is nothing more blissful than living out your highest principle.

So it starts by honoring your own heart. It starts by letting happiness live there, to stop hurting yourself, to stop wounding yourself, because you are not Jesus junior. You are not going to be that. But when you turn towards your needs and not your fear or guilt, you begin to get sensitive and then you can feel another person's pain or happiness. You can't do that with a wounded heart. First, take care of your own heart. Next, find someone else you can be in community with or maybe a whole church that you can do this with. But do it sacrament-ally as initiation into the whole of life, knowing that ultimately it all goes back and it will either be misery or a joyful gift. Ultimately it is not complete until it includes everybody—people, animals, plants, even insects. I cannot cut off any part of the tree of life without losing my own relationship. When I do that, when I realize that yes, I am going to die, but the good news is that I don't have to die of something, I can die for something, then my life becomes a joyful gift and the fear is gone. The joy is constant and that is why this is called good news. Each one of you is a child of God because of your faith in Christ Jesus, not the church, not somebody who lived a long time ago, but universal love. All of you have been baptized into Christ, you have clothed yourself with Christ and in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus.

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We are an affiliate of The Center for Progressive Christianity. (www.tcpc.org)

By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

- Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus,
- Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us,
- Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,
- Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to:
 - believers and agnostics,
 - conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
 - women and men,
 - those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
 - those of all races and cultures,
 - those of all classes and abilities,
 - those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;
- Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe,
- Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes,
- Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do:
 - striving for peace and justice among all people,
 - protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and
 - bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers,
- Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

(Developed by the Center for Progressive Christianity)



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