

Sunday January 1, 2023

Lesson 5: Children of God Through Adoption

Scripture: Galatians 3: 23-4:7

Context:

We begin our unit “Power and Belonging” today, a unit spanning five Sundays. On this New Year’s Day, we look at the book of Galatians. The book of Galatians looks at some of the conflicts taking place between the Christians in Galatia and how God wanted them to reconcile and move forward. Our purpose is to celebrate how Gentiles were adopted into God’s family, and then ask what this means for our mission today.

Paul writes to address specific issues which have arisen between the Galatian Christians including the interpretation of the law in scripture and its connection to Jesus. For Paul, the law defined deeds and the lack of deeds in terms of God’s purposes.¹ Law was part of the understanding to help humans comprehend sinfulness and disobedience to God. The role of the law as Paul alludes to, is a custodial one, with the power to detain and even enslave, but not to liberate.² There was a specific function to the law for its time and place. The law allowed there to be order and accountability until Christ came.

The word “custodian” in the text also gives an interesting perspective on the law and how it was to function. The word was *paidagogos* in Greek and could be translated to “tutor” as well.³ This translation points to how the law functioned as an educator, to guide people and yet to also encourage thinking about application and interpretation. Often, the *paidagogos* in wealthy Greek and Roman families was a slave who lived with the family and taught the children when not in school.⁴ The use of this allusion would have helped Galatian Christians to see the law as important, and yet see Christ as an ultimate fulfillment of the law.

Paul wants the readers to see the law is not meant to divide them though. He goes on to say how faith brings them all under one roof, with Jesus Christ as the one who comes to fulfill all things. In what could be termed as the climax of the letter, Paul stresses how Christ’s death and resurrection as a means of grace creates one community.⁵ Baptism is now what unites them instead of circumcision or the law. The social distinctions may remain and yet they do not bar the community of faith being together.

Furthermore, Paul uses the analogy of family to give Galatian Christians an identity to cling to and define themselves. He moves from guardians and trustees to those of a family, where mutual love and care is provided. Humanity becomes heirs as God claims us through adoption.

¹ Cousar, Charles. “Galatians.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 78.

² *Ibid.*, 79.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

Application

Paul is a master at using analogies to meet people in the everyday vernacular. He employs cultural allusions, political language, and social conventions. As he does so, he helps to frame things for the Christian community to help them see how God has made them to be in relationship with one another. Today's scripture exemplifies as much with Paul using adoption language to help us connect to how God has claimed and loved all of us as God's own.

For the past several years, I have had the privilege to work with the Department of Human Resources in the county where I live. As a result, I have learned many things about the welfare of children, foster care, and the various components of family dynamics. Whenever I return from working with the workers or reviewing a case, I receive a different way of looking at the world and how we are all interconnected to one another.

Families can both be a simple, and complex thing. For some of us, family means the immediate people in our household or those we are directly connected to us whether it is our parents, siblings, children, and grandchildren. Yet many people usually go beyond the immediate household to include extended relatives; those who are aunts and uncles, cousins, great aunts and uncles, etc. There might be certain physical characteristics, similar personality types, and religious values which can unite the family.

In the case of adoption, or foster care, these dynamics are a little different. And some of the beauty can be found in those families where they find other ways than the norm to connect and feel love. There is where true adoption occurs and the connection is not biological, as it is on belonging and love.

For the Gentile audience in the early church, this was the goal Paul had in mind as he sought to unite those who came from a Jewish background to those who were unfamiliar with the traditions and the importance of the law. Because of the diversity, there was at times a disconnect, and as a result, division and at times leaders shoving others out based on various criteria. Just as we have seen in modern day examples, adoption and acceptance can present its own challenges and invite those involved to search deeper for what matters in belonging.

Perhaps this is one of the greatest struggles the church faces today. So often, we define belonging based on ideas we have concocted on our own about what is important. Some of these we are taught in our background, and other times they are ideas we have developed on our own. At other times, these ideas of belonging come from the society we live in and what it values. We even see within the church how there is a tendency to mimic whatever culture we find ourselves in, sometimes forgetting to look at the origins of the early church to see the diversity present there.

Yet here, God does not seem as swayed by public opinion or what groups or even individuals hold as dear. Instead, God adopts humanity as God's own children as made evident in the moving of the Triune God. Just as we see the holy trinity, God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in tandem, God gives us a model for how humanity is to live with one another.

Because God loved humanity, God adopted humanity, knowing at times we are completely unlike God. We have the less desirable characteristics, and even still, God has made us part of God's family. God doesn't make black sheep like we do within our own families because God can see we are all a black sheep in our own ways. God makes us part of the family, showing us a spirit of adoption.

In the church we have lost the ability to see people as our brothers and sisters as our family. We might excuse bad behavior and yet we do not love. We use the tactics of the world to hurt one another, slander each other, and then act shocked when our churches remain full of

empty pews and the world goes on. We do things like disaffiliate from denominations because it's easier to cut off people we disagree with than engage with those who are different or acknowledge our own lust for power and control. We break up the family, and for what greater good or purpose?

In Galatians, God is reminding us there is a different way. God is reminding us how as we are adopted; God wants us to love and see a new mission. God wants us to expand our definition of family beyond our norms and see how we are adopted brothers and sisters in our Lord. God wants us to celebrate our differences and acknowledge how we all need God as our parent and guide.

How can God use our differences for good in the kingdom? Why do you think God adopts all of us as part of the family of God? Who are people who have taught you how to love unconditionally? What are ways you can “adopt” and love others? How can the church show the world a different way of being family?

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