

Nothing but the Blood (Part 4)

Galatians 2:1-10

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We believe that as followers of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, we worship the true God, who is the God of the Bible. Therefore, every other religion or faith that worships another god is, in our opinion, worshipping a false or “fake god.” However, there is more to what separates Christianity from all other religions. The fact is Christians don’t need to follow a set of rules to please God. Every other religion exhorts humans to try to reach their god by effort. But we fully admit that we can never reach God, because He is infinite and perfect, and we are finite and imperfect. We believe that God reached down to humanity, and made salvation available to us for free. We can’t earn salvation, so we can’t lose it. We stand before God based not on what we did, but on what Jesus already did for us. This means we are free from trying to earn our way into God’s kingdom. Paul taught this true gospel to the Galatians, but in his absence false teachers misled the people and told them they had to obey the Law in order to maintain their relationship with God. Now in the letter to the Galatians, Paul fights to make sure the Galatians understand that they are truly free, and are no longer bound by the Law, because God’s acceptance is a free gift.

At the end of chapter 1, Paul described his conversion in order to assert that his gospel was legitimate because it was directly from Jesus rather than from another apostle. Then in 2:1-5 Paul states that when he met the apostles for the church summit in Jerusalem, all the other apostles found that his gospel was the same gospel they preached, and they were comforted. The gospel of grace that Paul teaches is the true gospel. However, from v. 4 we see that false teachers arose, pretending to follow Christ, spying on those who had been freed, and working to enslave true followers of Christ. They tried to take away the freedom that makes Christianity different than other religions, so Paul must fight for Christian freedom.

This fight is a constant battle even today, because the idea of receiving salvation for free is unnatural. It doesn’t compute. We are so used to a world where we earn what we receive. It’s not natural for us to love even our spouses or children unconditionally, and that makes it hard for us to accept that this kind of unconditional love can exist. We must accept the fact that once we are cleansed, our sins no longer stick to us. Jesus washed away our past, present, and future sins.

God looks at us and sees Jesus' righteousness covering us. We are free from slavery to sin, from the Law that condemns, and from the punishment of death.

Once we accept that we are free, we should accept each other as free also. We should not try to enslave others with our expectations of what being a Christian should look like. Don't tell your children God will be displeased if they don't behave as you would like. You can tell them *you* will be displeased, but God loves them no matter what. Don't judge people based on your own personal preferences or on unimportant issues that have no bearing on their relationship with God. There are primary doctrines like salvation by grace through faith, the divinity of Jesus, and the Trinity, which we must hold on to and fight for. If someone doesn't believe these, then they cannot be considered a brother or sister in Christ. But secondary issues such as paedobaptism may cause separation into different church communities, but does not exclude anyone from the body of Christ. Tertiary issues can cause disagreements in the same church community, but for those we must just agree to disagree. And quaternary issues are so insignificant that we should not put any emphasis on them. For all but the primary issues, we have freedom to decide, so let us not limit each other's freedom in these things. We may have our own personal preferences for how one should dress for church or what type of music is appropriate, but don't enslave others by imposing your preferences on them. It does not have any bearing on their relationship with God or their salvation.

In vv. 6-10 Paul states that in the meeting in Jerusalem, the apostles agreed that they would focus on the Jews and Paul could focus on preaching to the Gentiles. They only asked that he continue to remember the poor (v. 10). This is not, as some might argue, a rule that we have to follow for salvation. In Romans 15:26-27 and 1 Corinthians 16:1-3 we see that the church in Jerusalem was under intense persecution and there were many Jewish Christians in need. The apostles were telling Paul to remember to help the persecuted church in Jerusalem financially, which Paul did by collecting offerings in the churches outside Judea. These offerings did not earn salvation for anyone, rather they were in response to receiving Jesus' salvation, just as the one leper came back to praise Jesus in response to being cleansed. The other nine didn't become leprous again because they didn't return. So our obedience to Jesus' commands to love God and love one another in Christ is a response to God's grace, enabled by the transformative power of Jesus' life already in us. So let us understand the freedom we have in Jesus and extend it to each other within the congregation.