

15 November 2015

Grown Up Believing
Galatians 3:23-29; John 6:60-69

Galatians 3:23-29

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

John 6:60-69

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.' Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'

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Last week I talked about financial stewardship and told some of my own story. I told how I had been raised to regard the Old Testament principle of tithing, giving ten percent of one's income, as an inviolable law, but how as I grew in my faith and understanding, I came to realize that we are no longer subject to the Old Testament law. Eventually I learned to give for deeper reasons – not because it was the law of God, but because giving is a necessary part of who I am. As I filled out my pledge card this year, it struck me, “Hey, that’s basically a tithe. Okay.” But that’s not why I give – meeting some external obligation. Giving is deeper than that for me now.

So today, let's take that principle beyond financial giving, but it's not actually a unique process – learning something first as a law and then discovering it in a deeper way when you get older. And tithing wasn't the only absolute law I grew up with. Among the other black and white expectations of my childhood were: making my bed every morning, sweeping my bedroom every Saturday, writing thank you notes for every gift, vacuuming the car interior once a week, and helping with dishes every evening. These were simply laws that I had to follow, but as I grew older, I discovered they weren't absolutes. In college, no one forced me to make my bed or sweep. It was up to me. The same is true for the rest of these rules: they aren't laws for me any more, but choices. Some of them I choose to do. Some of them I think would be good to do, but I

don't always. And no, I don't vacuum the car every week. The point, though, is this: I started out with law, learned from that disciplinarian, but eventually reached a point where I could choose for myself.

The life of faith is like that, too. In fact, this is the center of Paul's theology. We all begin a life of faith based on obeying rules, but by God's grace we outgrow that. In that early stage, we think we are acceptable to God to the extent that we keep the laws, but in Christ we discover that we are acceptable to God because God chooses to accept us. We call that grace. That *doesn't* mean that the law is bad, though. As Paul says, it's good, just temporary. It's there as a disciplinarian, pointing us in the right direction until we are ready to choose our own path. Galatians 3:24: *Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith.* But we do need to take that next step, because as helpful a first step as the law is, a faith based on law bears two huge weaknesses. First, it is shallow and only cares about external behavior. Under the law, you can hate people as much as you want, so long as you don't kill or injure anyone. That's not good enough for Christ. Second, a faith based on law creates divisions between people. People who define their faith in terms of keeping certain rules are invariably ready to condemn everyone who doesn't. But when we define our faith in terms of having been accepted unconditionally by grace, we respond by taking that same unconditional acceptance to others. That's what a grown up faith looks like.

Perhaps this distinction between a faith of rules and a grown up faith can help us understand the religious climate in America today, because many of the most prominent expressions of Christianity are based entirely on law. Believing that acceptance by God is determined by keeping certain rules, there are Christians who define our faith exclusively in terms of opposing abortion, affirming biblical inerrancy, wanting prayer in schools, voting for Republicans, being a member of a Bible-believing church, and of course not being gay. To many of these Christians, people who are on the other side of any of these issues are not just wrong, they aren't real Christians. We usually call people whose faith is like this "fundamentalists," and their faith is both shallow and divisive. But I'm not done yet. There's another group of Christians whose faith is equally based on law, which sees acceptance by God as having to do with keeping *other* rules: opposing genetically-modified food, working for gun control and open immigration, not shopping at Wal-Mart, voting for Democrats, being a member of a social justice church, and of course recycling. To many of these Christians, too, people who are on the other side of any of these issues are not just wrong, they aren't real Christians. We don't usually call this second group "fundamentalists," but we should. They are just as shallow and just as divisive.

We had an interesting intersection of these two fundamentalist groups just this week: the great Starbucks coffee cup controversy of 2015. If you haven't heard about this, congratulations, but I'm going to tell you anyway. Early last week, it was suddenly all over the internet that Christians were protesting the holiday design of Starbucks coffee cups – a plain red – and calling for a boycott of the coffee shop. Apparently, the lack of specifically Christmas-y designs was another attack in the "War on Christmas." As soon as that word got out, there immediately were hundreds of angry responses, many from "progressive" Christians, sneering at those ignorant fundies and their persecution complex. In fact, this was probably how you learned of the controversy, because there were more articles making fun of the boycott than articles calling for a boycott. *Way* more. Because, it turns out, the whole silly controversy came from one former

pastor who now has a YouTube channel on which he makes a living saying outrageous things to attract viewers. That's it. To the best of my knowledge, no official Christian group anywhere was actually offended by red coffee cups. But that's the the point; the point is the response this nonsense got. As soon as the make-believe issue was raised and framed in terms of a "War on Christmas," then thousands of Christians – both conservative and liberal – jumped on it as an opportunity to affirm the truth of their own faith by attacking someone else. This is what faith looks like before it grows up.

So what does a grown up faith look like? That's harder to describe, because part of being an adult is being unique, but we do have this interesting story in John chapter 6. Jesus has just fed 5,000 with a few loaves and fish and is using that as a starting point to talk about true nourishment. John 6:27: *Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.* What is this eternal bread? the people ask eagerly. Is it magic? What does it do? No, Jesus says, the food that lasts forever comes from believing. Believing what? Tell us what to believe! That'd be great, if just believing the right thing gave us eternal life! No, Jesus says. It's not *what* but *who*. It's me. I am the bread of life. Partake of me. That was it. Jesus refused to make it more clear. He wouldn't explain. He would not make it simple. He steadfastly refused to let people think that accepting this list of concepts or following that list of rules would be enough. Just partake of me, join yourself to me.

That's where we read this, *When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?'* What a lot of people want is a faith where you knew exactly what to do and then you're done. This faith that makes us figure things out ourselves – that's hard. *Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?'* Simon Peter answered him, *'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'*

I don't think Peter stayed because he understood any better than anyone else. In the gospels, Peter's no theologian. In fact, he's wrong way more often than he's right. But he stayed – even though he didn't understand all that Jesus said and even though following Jesus was often uncomfortable and even though everyone else was jumping ship – because being right didn't matter; what mattered was being *with*. Walking with Jesus and trying to live the life he lived. That's a grown up faith.

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