

June 13, 2004
Genesis 15: 1-6, Galatians 2:15-21
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“To Live in Christ”

When Bunny and I began our ministry together serving two small churches in Eastern North Carolina, we were as green as green could be. In the days before co-pastors were allowed in the southern Presbyterian Church, she was the pastor of the church in town and I was her associate. I was the pastor of the church in the country and she was my associate. Someone asked, “What did that mean?” It meant that I said, “Yes, ma’am,” to her in town and she said, “Yes, sir,” to me in the country. There was so much we had to learn. The love, kindness, patience and sometimes even the peculiarities of those faithful Christians gave us a deeper understanding of what it means to live a Christian life.

There was a tendency among some of the members of the country church to draw a pretty clear distinction between those who were Christians and those who were not, those who were good people and those who were not, and those who were saved and those who were not. In the minds of some, there was an exact correspondence between the “good people” of the community and God’s elect. What placed you among the elect were the public aspects of your behavior. If you followed the rules, went to church, kept out of trouble, didn’t drink, engage in sexual improprieties, or curse, then you were “in the kingdom.” If you did not conform to all of the norms, values and prejudices of the community, then there was something wrong with you. Your salvation was in serious question.

What does it mean to be a Christian and to live a Christian life? Is it simply a matter of following a list of do’s and don’ts? Is it our efforts to be a good people that make us followers of Jesus Christ? Certainly, striving to live a good and faithful life is a good thing. Yet, it is not our striving that puts us in a right relationship with God and makes us disciples of Jesus Christ. It is God’s work in us that gives us life. We are not the first to be confused about the foundation of our relationship with God. The early church found itself in conflict over this same issue. The gospel quickly spread from the Jewish community in Jerusalem to the Gentile communities in the Roman world. After his encounter with the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus, Paul committed his life to spreading the gospel among the Gentile community. Peter continued to preach the gospel primarily among the Jewish community. At a meeting in Jerusalem, the leaders of the church blessed these distinct ministries. Furthermore, the leaders of the church said that Gentiles did not have to become Jews or keep Jewish rituals and customs in order to follow Jesus.

In Antioch in Syria, these two worlds collided. For 14 years, Paul and his fellow apostles proclaimed the gospel in the predominately Gentile culture of the eastern Mediterranean world. In cities like Antioch, the gospel created communities of faith that drew people together from all walks of life and from all ethnic groups. Rich and

poor, slave and free, Jew and Gentile lived together and shared a common faith in Jesus Christ. The Jewish Christians did not think of the Gentile Christians as unclean because they did not practice Jewish rituals and customs.

Not everyone was happy with this situation. Peter and Paul were together with the church in Antioch. The diverse group of Christians in Antioch enjoyed table fellowship together. In the first century, eating together at table was an intimate act of love, grace and hospitality. Eating together meant total acceptance of one another. This is why Jesus got into such trouble with the Pharisees when he ate with sinners. When a group of Jewish Christians came from Jerusalem to Antioch, Peter drew back from eating with the Gentile Christians. He no longer ate with them for fear of offending the visitors from Jerusalem. Paul confronted Peter about this hypocrisy. It was more than a question of bad manners or the lack of hospitality. At stake was the very essence of the gospel.

By withdrawing from the Gentile Christians, Peter acted as if they were not acceptable to God because they were uncircumcised and did not keep the ritual laws of the Jewish people. Paul declared that it is not the doing of the works of the law that puts us in a right relationship with God but “faith in Jesus Christ.” The Greek actually reads, “through the faith of Jesus Christ.” What depends on a preposition? Everything! It is not our faith that saves us or puts us in a right relationship with God. It is the faithful obedience of Jesus Christ that justifies us. Salvation is a gift which we receive in faith. Our new life with God is a gift of God’s grace through the saving death of Jesus on the cross. For Peter to act as if acceptance with God depended upon keeping the law was to undermine the truth of the Christian life. The foundation of the Christian life is God’s grace in Jesus Christ. We are accepted in him. No matter who we are or what we have done, God loves us.

This good news of salvation comes through the hearing of faith and not through the works of the law. It is God’s grace which we receive in faith that saves us. Salvation is not our own doing. It is the work of God in us. By withdrawing from the Gentile Christians, Peter implied that their faith was insufficient and something else was needed in order for them to be acceptable to God. In these words to the churches of Galatia, Paul declares that our efforts to make ourselves acceptable to God by our striving and good works only lead us further away from God. We try to rely on ourselves. We build our self-esteem on desperate efforts at perfection. We fool ourselves by thinking we can bamboozle God by moral posturing. Striving to be righteous we become self-righteous. When we fail to live up to our own unrealistic expectations, our world comes tumbling down.

It took me a long, long time to understand the radical character of God’s grace. I kept asking the wrong question. I kept thinking that in order to be sure of God’s love, I had to do something—perform some good deed, try not to sin, or have a deep faith. I kept wondering if my faith was strong enough or was I good enough to be saved. One day in seminary, when we were studying this same passage in Galatians, I understood for the first time that I am accepted and loved by God not because of what I do or do not

do, but simply because of God's grace in Jesus Christ. I realized that I had it all wrong. I was thinking it was my faith that saved me. Therefore, in the end, it all depended upon me and my capacity to believe. Suddenly I realized that the Christian life is all gift and grace. Our faith is not what we offer God to earn God's grace. Our faith is a response to God's grace. Just like Abraham and Sarah, we are justified by grace through faith. Abraham believed the unbelievable promise of God that he and Sarah would be the parents of a great nation. The Scripture says, "Abram believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." Through faith, we believe that God has accepted us in Jesus Christ. Through faith, we make this wonderful gift our own.

In every Christian life, there is a death and resurrection. Paul says that we are crucified with Christ so that it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us. The life we live, we live by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us. The first thing that happens for us to live with Christ is that we die to self. We put to death the terribly destructive notion that we can by our sheer effort make ourselves acceptable to God. The self-righteousness of the church is the first casualty of the cross. When we die to self, Christ comes alive in us. The life we live, we live in the power of his spirit. To live the Christian life is to open our lives to invite Christ to live in us.

In the country church we served, there was a man who had grown up in the church, but he hardly ever attended. He was a brick mason who loved to hunt and spend time in the woods. His life was not all that happy: he suffered from emphysema, had problems with his extended family and was a heavy drinker. He didn't care much for church because he said that most of the folks in the church were just hypocrites. One day his brother-in-law insulted his wife and he decided to settle the score. He drove over to his brother-in-law's house where he confronted him with a loaded shotgun. As he held the barrel of the gun a few inches from his brother-in-law's head, he almost pulled the trigger. Something stopped him. He said he realized in that moment just what a wild animal he had become.

I heard his story later that night. I was driving by the church and saw his truck parked in the yard. Seeing his truck at the church was a bit unusual. I stopped in and found him inside the sanctuary praying. He told me the whole story. When he finished, we talked a bit and had a prayer together. I have to tell you that I did not feel anything unusual or out of the ordinary during that moment of prayer.

At 6 a.m. the next morning he was on my doorstep. He wanted me to go to the sheriff's office with him so he could turn himself in for assaulting his brother-in-law. He said that when we prayed, he felt the anger and burdens of his life lift away and a sense of total peace fill him. He gave up his heavy drinking, he let go of the bitterness that had marked his life, he rejected his racist past, and he began to come to church. Even though he had less than a tenth grade education, he became a voracious reader of theology and Bible commentaries. He asked me for everything I had in my library. He not only read easy books; he read hard books by Bonhoeffer, Niebuhr and Tillich. He read Karl Barth's commentary on Romans, which turned the theological world

upside down in the second decade of the last century. He told me it was the most exciting book he had ever read. One day he called me on the phone and read me a quote from Barth that said that there was no one, not even the most villainous person for whom God is not Father and Christ is not brother. "Isn't that amazing," he said. In spite of all the suspicion and criticism he received from his extended family and from the members of that "righteous" congregation, he lived with a joy and a peace that was rare in that community. He demonstrated a love for others that knew no bounds. I tell you his story at some length because he became for me the embodiment of the Christian life. He taught me that salvation is a gift which we receive in faith. He taught me how to live in Christ. We live in Christ by opening our lives to invite Christ to live in us. His life taught me the meaning of the words:

"I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me."